

Saint Clare of Assisi



by Nesta De Robeck

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“The tower which guards the shrine of Saint Clare is tall, and strong and beautiful, even as she was; and the pearly grey and rose of its stone reflect all the light in the sky. It catches the first rays of the sunrise, and its bells ring for the new day. Throughout the hours it waits upon God’s pleasure in sunshine and storm, and its mid-day bell recalls us to His Presence in His world. Its face is turned to the sunset, and while many birds fly round it singing, it joins with all the other bells of the valley in echoing the Angelus; the time for rest has come. When the moon rises the tower is still watching, for perhaps some new star may be born this night. Thus pass moments, centuries; the tower of Saint Clare remains tall and strong and beautiful.”

Lights and Shadows in the Background

Assisi is a city with two faces: to the south nothing disturbs the serenity of the valley of Spoleto; the diaphanous lines of the hills are so gentle, the light so translucent and tender that often it is hard to tell where the hills and the sky melt into one another. As there is no harsh line in the landscape, so there is none in the upward slope of the city against the background of Monte Subasio; light seems to emanate from its very stones as the colour changes from hour to hour until it becomes a rosy reflection of the sunset. But what a different view we see when, from the castle hill, we turn towards the north! The steep slope plunges down to a narrow valley through which winds the river: other hills rise rugged, and grandly defiant to enclose it; everything speaks of solitude, effort, and strength in assault as in defence, while the wind rages down the gorges and over the hills.

These two aspects of Assisi are reflected in its history and in the character of its people; and this is true of both Francis and Clare.

We know nothing of the centuries during which Etruscans and Umbrians glared at each other across the twenty miles of valley between Perugia and Assisi, when the boundary of the Etruscan kingdom was marked by the Tiber. Recorded history begins some three hundred years before Christ when the Romans arrived and Assisi became a beautiful city with green terraces facing southwards, with aqueducts, forum, baths, theatre and amphitheatre, and though it was not renowned as a religious centre as was Gubbio or Todi, nevertheless Assisi was a city of temples, and the memory of the Roman gods lingers on in many a name of gate, hill, and village. Communication with Rome was assured by the road along the valley, and a number of well-to-do families owned villas in which life was civilised and pleasant, and the literary-minded no doubt read all the best authors and invited the local poet Propertius to recite his verses. Assisi possessed all the amenities of Roman life, and those people felt that their civilisation was assured, even when it was already being undermined by its own inherent defects and by the vast movements of Barbarians many hundreds of miles away.

Civilised Roman Assisians can hardly have been seriously impressed when they heard that an old man, Felicianus, was preaching the doctrines of the new Christian sect to anyone who would listen to him in the fields and even in the streets. The Consul Lucius Flavius, however, was a devout pagan, and a savage persecution began. Felicianus, then nearly a hundred, gathered his followers together on what is now the hill leading down to San Damiano: he set up a cross saying: "Remember in this place to venerate and adore the cross which I have planted in honour of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here

you shall pray to Him and praise Him in the morning, in the noon day, and in the evening. Praise Him, and offer Him your hearts. Felicianus, the first bishop of Assisi, died on his way to his martyrdom in Rome: and over the place where that cross stood a chapel was built, and round it tombs have been found inscribed with the names, and sometimes with the professions of their owners, ordinary men and women in whom the martyrs kindled a like heroism to their own.

Assisi had numerous martyrs, among them the Bishop Vittorinus who baptized a great number of people before he suffered together with many of his flock. He was succeeded by Savinus during the reign of Diocletian, when the Prefect Venustianus was eager and zealous for the Emperor's favour. Everyone knew that Savinus was an intrepid Christian, and he with two deacons was brought to trial in the forum. The interrogation began: "Who are you?" "Savinus, a bishop and a sinner." "Are you a slave or free?" "A slave of Christ, free from the devil." He was offered the choice either to burn incense to Jupiter or die; and a precious image of the god was brought made of coral and gold. "Is not this a god?" they asked. "No, and that you may know the truth of what I say, let me do with it what I will." Savinus took the image and dashed it to the ground where it lay smashed. His hands were cut off, but he could still encourage his deacons in their martyrdom before being imprisoned, and the threat of death did not prevent eleven more people from being baptized. Venustianus became blind and was ready then to listen to a converted blind man whose sight had been restored by Savinus. At last the Prefect was taken to Savinus who ordered that the fragments of the image of Jupiter should be thrown into the river; Venustianus and his household declared themselves Christians, and at the moment of baptism his sight too was restored. He went to live in the Bishop's house until the Emperor's order arrived

that Venustianus and his family were to be beheaded, while Savinus was taken to Spoleto and there scourged to death.

Then there was Rufinus who with his son Cesidius had first been imprisoned in Rome for preaching the Gospel. Two women were sent to tempt them, but on the contrary these were also converted, and suffered so valiantly for the faith that, in their turn, they converted their executioners. Cesidius was killed, but Rufinus left Rome and reached Assisi where he became bishop, and more citizens were baptized. Eventually he and some of his followers were arraigned in the forum before the Pro-Consul Aspasius, and he answered the same questions as Savinus, and was offered the same choice. When they refused to burn incense to the gods a number of the Christians were flung down a deep well, while Rufinus was scourged and thrown into a furnace. The flames subsided, the heat became as cool water, and the Bishop emerged, unsinged. He was accused of sorcery: "Christ is my magic," he answered: he survived many tortures, and at last on August 11 he was thrown into the river bound to a block of stone, "glorifying the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost."

These stories were repeated by every generation of Assisians, enshrined in many popular legends, and especially Rufinus became the beloved and venerated Christian hero and protector.

All down the valley the same struggle went on between Christianity and paganism, and every city had its martyrs. Christian hermits settled on Monte Luco behind Spoleto, one of the first European imitations of the Thebaid, and in the basilica of San Salvatore there still exists a fourth-century frescoed representation of the cross.

An ancient tradition, which at any rate cannot be disproved, ascribes to this period the building of the little chapel of

Santa Maria della Porziuncula, in the valley below Assisi. The story is that it was the work of pilgrims returning from the Holy Land filled with devotion for the Blessed Virgin. The subtitle “della Porziuncula” may have come because someone gave a little portion of land on which to build, but very early the chapel was also called Saint Mary of the Angels for it was an angel-haunted place. Thus the chapel so dear to Francis and Clare was probably the earliest Assisi sanctuary of our Lady, directly connected with the age of the martyrs.

Christianity had become the religion of the empire, but it was threatened at every moment by heresies and corruption, tossed hither and thither in political upheavals, and yet the one stable light in the world. Like many another small city Assisi shared in all these vicissitudes.

Italy had become familiar with invasions even before Christ's birth, and the fifth century saw the beginning of a long series of conquests. Alaric the Visigoth besieged Rome three times and sacked it; Attila and his Huns overran all northern Italy while the Vandals threatened the empire in northern Africa. Vacillating and decadent emperors were no match for the Ostrogoth leaders, and yet the conquerors were themselves conquered by the might of the Roman civilisation, and though Ataulph might wed the Roman princess Galla Placidia, he never aspired to make himself emperor. The greatest Ostrogoth, Theodoric, ruled in Ravenna as a Gothic king, but he died defending the empire. The Goths were Christians, but also Arians, therefore opposed by all the Catholic bishops of Italy, and their presence gave rise to bitter theological controversy. Yet the Goths could claim that they did not proselytise, that no Goth converted to Christianity was penalised, that the civil service was left in Italian hands, and Roman law respected and upheld. Had the Gothic domination survived would it

have saved Italy other and worse conquests? The forces of the Western empire would certainly never have turned the Goths out, but Justinian in Constantinople was determined to expel them from Italy and Belisarius was put in command of the army. There were still regions of southern Italy which were Greek-speaking colonies favourable to the Byzantines, and for twenty-eight terrible years – from a.d. 527 to 565 – the struggle against the Goths continued. At one moment it seemed as though the imperial victory was assured, but under Totila the Goths made a new stand and recaptured a good deal of lost country, and it was at this time that they besieged, took, and sacked Assisi. Then the forces of the empire were reinforced under Narses, and his victory in 552, at the battle of Gualdo Tadino only a few miles distant, drove the Goths north and Assisi was occupied by the victors.

Through prolonged and bitter experience Italians were learning how to survive invasion, either by armed resistance, or when that was not possible by bowing to the storm and subsequently reasserting themselves. Besides the actual storm of the fighting they were assailed in far more insidious ways, for instance, by having to offer “hospitality” to foreign troops for long periods; no invasion was rounded tidily off, but inevitably each one left behind numbers of people who had had to be absorbed into the local population in the country districts as in the town. As always happens, each invasion left a deep mark; and no other country bears the impress of so many varied cultures and races as does Italy in her whole stretch from the Alps to Sicily.

Officially Italy was free of the Gothic rule, but the worst was that the empire proved unable to rule; the imperial garrisons shut themselves up in the cities while sporadic fighting continued. The sufferings of the people were terrible. Earthquakes, famine, and pestilence seemed to have

combined in the work of destruction; and to add to all this, the way into Italy was unguarded, and Alboin with savage hordes of Lombards poured in to ravage cities and countryside. This was a.d. 568. To men like Saint Gregory the Great it appeared indeed as though, humanly speaking, nothing of civilisation could be saved in such a cataclysm, when the civil order had crashed, and the appalling trials of multitudes made death seem the only remedy. In a former generation Saint Augustine had felt the same, and his *De Civitate Dei*, begun in a.d. 410, was the Christian answer to the sack of Rome. More than ever his words seemed justified, and the only consolation in such disaster was the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem beyond all the material ruin of civilisation. And indeed the Christian Faith proved equal to the test; men still had the vitality to build up an art so rich and beautiful that what we see of it in Ravenna, for instance, is like the rising of the sun; Saint Gregory still had the valour to send missionaries to England as well as having at heart the conversion of the Arian invaders; Saint Benedict had already founded his abbeys and written his rule headed by the quotation: "Turn away from evil and do good: seek after peace and pursue it."

The next centuries were dark; Rome sank into squalor and degradation and corruption, and outwardly there must have seemed no authority that could avail to save the Church's organisation from perishing. Yet through all these disasters, despite the conquest of Christian Africa by the Arabs, and with Saracens threatening Rome itself, the Church was spreading and acting as a great unifying force between peoples of the most varied races. The light of sanctity was everywhere. A world of wars and violence could not kill the sense of Christian unity as it had been conceived by Saint Augustine and all the great Christian thinkers: the urge to unity is the counterweight to the evil that divides men.

The Assisan chronicles describe the Lombards as “exceedingly fierce and terrible”: with their hair dyed green these marauding northern tribes devastated all they found, and naturally struck terror into Italian hearts. The conquerors divided Italy into new principalities, and Assisi was included in the important duchy of Spoleto. The Lombards, too, were Arians, but Paul the deacon tells how in 610, Ariulfo, duke of Spoleto, was converted from “idolatry” – by which he may mean heresy – to the Catholic faith through a miraculous apparition of Saint Savinus the martyr-bishop of Assisi. In the course of time many Lombards became Catholics, and gradually through the inevitable daily intercourse and intermarriage between the occupying race and the native population a certain degree of fusion came about. Each race influenced the other.

The Lombard predominance lasted a good two hundred years during which time the duchy of Spoleto was repeatedly a centre of disturbance; at one time it was at war with Perugia whose Lombard ruler had submitted to the imperial exarch in Ravenna; at another Lombard forces from Spoleto besieged Ravenna and marched south on Rome and Naples. During the earlier period of the occupation they were the Pope’s enemies, but later his supporters against the iconoclast emperor of the East. On one occasion Liutprando, king of the Lombards, came to Spoleto to quell a revolt among his vassals, and in all the violent political cross-currents the smaller cities were involved together with the greater.

By the eighth century, history was preparing to take another turn. The Carolingian dynasty had established itself with the Pope’s approval. Pippin the Short had been anointed king by Saint Boniface the English apostle of Germany, and the ambition of the Lombard King Aistulph in Italy brought the Pope and the Frankish king into a growing alliance. Aistulph

was not satisfied with threatening the imperial exarchate of Ravenna, but he also wished to rule Rome with the result that Pope Stephen appealed to King Pippin; the Lombards were defeated by “liberating” French forces, and the cities taken from the Lombards were handed over to the Holy See. The Lombard Duke of Spoleto decided to make common cause with the Franks, and this brought the Lombard King Didier to the valley of Spoleto, sacking and burning what he met out of revenge. Sporadic fighting went on throughout the country, confusion was everywhere, no authority could keep order, there was no security for life or property.

Twenty years later, in 773, Assisi again suffered. King Didier’s ambition was not satisfied with attacking the imperial exarchate in Ravenna; he also wished to subdue Rome. Pope Hadrian, a Roman patrician, appealed to Pippin’s son Charlemagne, and again the Franks defeated the Lombards, and the Frankish King took for himself the iron crown of Lombardy. Assisi was besieged, and the Frankish soldiers found an entrance by the Roman Cloaca Maxima which had either been left unguarded or was betrayed to the invaders. All the inhabitants were massacred, and the city was destroyed. A chronicle describes the situation: “Thus Assisi bereft of her citizens found herself an unhappy widow. Then was the most clement ruler grieved, and ordering that the city should be rebuilt, he placed therein a new colony of Christians of the Roman faith, and the city was restored, and in it divine worship.” Oliver the Frank became a hero of a later Assisan legend which tells how he slew a monster called Occhialone who lived in a cave behind the castle hill and murdered all who approached. Arianism may have disappeared from Assisi with the coming of the Franks, but despite these political changes quite a number of Lombards must have survived and stayed on in LTmbria, for well into the Middle

Ages Assisan chronicles register Lombard names and Lombard customs.

Even this Frankish triumph did not bring order into Italy, and twenty-five years later Charlemagne again intervened to protect Pope Leo III against the violence of his enemies in Rome. To everyone the King of the Franks appeared as the only person able to guarantee stability, and already the Patriarch of Jerusalem, despairing of protection from Constantinople, had sent him the keys of the Holy Sepulchre. Charlemagne came again to Italy in the autumn of 800, the Pope took a solemn oath on the Gospels of his innocence of the crimes imputed to him by his enemies, and Charlemagne was crowned emperor on Christmas day in Saint Peter's. Latin Christianity had found its champion, and there was again an emperor in the West.

Even after Charlemagne's death fourteen years later the Frankish ascendancy in Italy continued: the duchy of Spoleto passed into the hands of Franks; but this is an obscure period in Assisan history. Local power was shared by the bishops and counts assisted by judges chosen among the citizens. There must have been an interval of at least relative peace and increasing prosperity, and this coincided with a new wave of veneration for the city's martyrs, and especially for Saint Rufinus, whose body had hitherto lain in an obscure sepulchre outside the walls.

It was the people of Assisi who wished that a new and grand church should be built in the saint's honour; they did not wish his body to rest in the old cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore which had risen over the ruins of a Roman temple. The place they chose was a part of the city where the people habitually met for public discussions, and Saint Rufinus' body became a political symbol as well as a relic. According to Saint Peter Damian there were quarrels, there was

bloodshed, there were miracles, but anyhow the first record of donations for the new church is dated 1007, and this date makes one think that perhaps the decision to build a new church was at any rate partly the result of the panic over the year 1000. The end of the world had then seemed imminent; everywhere people prepared for their end, and when the sun rose as usual and nothing happened, a new church and greater honour for the martyr would not have seemed too great a thank-offering.

The remaining crypt of the first church is Carolingian in style; and a document of 1045 states that Bishop Ugone, a powerful man who was later sent as Roman legate in Germany regarding the election of Leo IX, was consecrated "in the house of Blessed Rufinus." This indicates that the new church was already regarded as the cathedral under the double title of Santa Maria and San Rufino.

A century later this first church was already felt to be inadequate by a city that was being rapidly enriched through expanding commerce, and in 1140 Giovanni di Gubbio was commissioned to rebuild it. Only the crypt of the original church remains; and Giovanni's facade is still one of the glories of Assisi, as is the bell-tower which rests upon a splendid Roman cistern. The final solemn translation of San Rufino's body to its present resting place beneath the high altar took place in 1212 when Francis was already famous; it was the year in which Clare left her home to follow him.

San Rufino was not the only church built and rebuilt in Assisi in the early ten hundreds: there was the Benedictine abbey on Monte Subasio, the abbey and church of San Pietro, the church of San Paolo, that of San Masseo; a war with Perugia in 1054 did not apparently interrupt this desire to build which was so characteristic of the age. Like most of their contemporaries the Assisians built with skill and splendour.

Romanesque architecture had come to its perfection, so had Romanesque sculpture which, for all its beauty and grandeur, never lost sight of the facts of cruelty and violence. How often did it not represent men destroying men, human backs being broken by the weight of the pillars resting on them, beasts devouring men or each other, and this at a time when the friendship of saints and beasts was being recounted in endless charming stories. The facade of San Rufino is an example.

Violence and corruption, spiritual illumination, aspiration and achievement walked side by side through the eleventh and twelfth centuries: in 1064 Rome was again sacked by Robert Guiscard and the Normans, and some years later the voice of Peter the Hermit rang out, followed by that of Saint Bernard summoning Christendom to the first Crusades. Who could remain unmoved by the cry of "Jerusalem qui plainte et pleure pour le secours qui trop demeure"; from all countries men set out, some saints, many idealists, many adventurers, the single-minded and the calculating, those who were ready for martyrdom, and those whose ambition was for power and money. Then in 1099 all the bells were set ringing for the news that Jerusalem was free; the Latin kingdom was established in the Holy City protected by the Knights Templars and the Knights Hospitallers, the Holy Places were accessible to pilgrims, and the Crusaders' castles appeared on the hills of Palestine. It was a moment of *Te Deums*.

This new opening of the East to the West was of incalculable advantage to commerce, learning, and the arts, and soon the Western missionaries would realize the immense field which awaited them. The educational impulse given by Charlemagne was strengthened; and the first flowering of national cultures was beginning within the framework of a united European Christian culture. And what a richness and

diversity and individual inspiration that unity was able to produce! There was enormous unifying strength in the Church's liturgy, not only in the Mass and Divine Office, but in everything connected with them, in all the arts. From Scotland to Sicily the same liturgical dramas were being performed, the same Gregorian music was being sung in all its perfection, some of the most beautiful religious poetry was being written, the Arthurian cycle of legends was about to emerge, the great tales of chivalry were being told, while poets had started singing the praises of our Lady and the saints in the vernacular. Every court and castle was the haunt of troubadour and trouvère and minnesinger singing of a knight's lady and his love: no wars and dissensions could stop genius which everywhere was at work praying, thinking, writing, singing, building, carving, painting, busy with every art and every craft. Each generation handed on a wonderfully increasing inheritance in the small cities just as much as in the great, and the world was being enriched by something very rare and beautiful.

The unity of faith proclaimed by scholars and artists of the Middle Ages was roughly that of every man; and it shone luminous and radiant in the lives of many saints. Many great orders had been or were being founded: Saint Romuald was the father of the Camaldolese, Saint Bruno of the Carthusians, Saint Bernard and Saint Stephen Harding of the Cistercians, Saint John Gualbert of the Vallombrosians, Saint Norbert of the Premonstratensians; Saint Anselm had kindled an inextinguishable light with his soaring realisation of God, his love of the Passion of Christ and of the Blessed Virgin, Saint Bernard had done the same; there were great visionaries like Saint Hildegard, Saint Elizabeth of Schoenau, Saint Mechtilde, Saint Gertrude, and all these men and women gave something divine to their fellow-men creatures. Everywhere scholars were "fighting the devil with pen and ink," and Montecassino, Bobbio, Saint Gall, Cluny,

Bee, Chartres, Saint Victor, York were centres of spiritual life and thought whose influence was felt from one end of Christendom to the other. None of this was theoretical; it was all intensely living and being expressed through most powerful and dynamic personalities.

The drag-away from this unity came through schism, heresy, and corruption. The whole of Christendom was wounded when in 1054 the Eastern Church declared its autonomy and threw off allegiance to Rome. Popes and anti-popes repeatedly defied each other; the Church was rent by political intrigues, and even in Rome the Pope was constantly subjected to violence and insult. Even such a great constructive reformer as Saint Gregory VII had difficulty in imposing his rule on the warring Roman factions, as on the schismatic Patarine Lombards; and all this happened in an age of very many saints and wide-spread acceptance of Christianity.

Lombardy – the province of Italy which had taken its name from the Lombard invaders – was the breeding ground for the Catharist heresy which taught that everything not pure spirit was created by an evil power, denied the sacraments, and opposed the whole outward organisation of the Church. There were many degrees among the Catharists, some being content to preach and practise poverty and penance, while the inner circle abominated marriage and all earthly happiness, and hastened death by self-torture and starvation. Catharism and its various offshoots spread all through northern and central Italy, took its firmest hold in southern France round Albi, and had devotees scattered throughout Europe.

There were other sects of both men and women who were all attracted by the idea of the evangelical life; some of these like the Poor Men of Lyons led by Pierre Valdes fell into

schism, others like the Beguines and Beghards and the Umiliati of Lombardy remained within the Church leading a communal life of voluntary poverty and charity under a rule sanctioned by the Church. These people took the literal words of the Gospel as their ideal, but the world was still waiting for Saint Francis to sweep thousands off their feet with his vision of what it means to follow Christ.

Abelard's disciple, Arnold of Brescia, also preached poverty with an enthusiasm akin to that of Saint Bernard; he wished to reform and reduce the organisation of the Church to its primitive simplicity, while his political passion made him wish to crown the people's majesty on the Capitol. To many Arnold was a heretic, to others a heroic reformer, but the revolutionary who wished to destroy the power of the Pope, Emperor, and nobles in favour of that of the people, finally faced a coalition which was too strong for him. Rome was placed under the interdict; Pope Adrian IV (Nicholas Breakspeare) appealed to Frederick Barbarossa, king of the Germans, whose first expedition into Italy in 1154 was to "liberate" the Pope from the violence of the new Roman Republic. Arnold fled but was recaptured and burnt.

These were the circumstances which brought the red-haired Frederick of Hohenstaufen on to the Italian scene. As soon as he had risen to power in Germany he dreamed of himself as the heir of Constantine and Charlemagne, the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, and perhaps he thought of his troops as the Roman legions. He talked of "our Roman laws," and the jurists of Bologna supported his claim. His only rival in power was Henry II of England, who far surpassed him as an organizer and administrator, but was nothing like so romantic and adventurous a person.

His second expedition into Italy was in 1158 when he entered into the long swaying struggle with the northern

Italian communes which involved also the rival claims of the Papacy and the Empire. It was another violent tangle full of knots and loose ends with many conflicting loyalties, sympathies, and interests. As a result of trying to throw off the imperial rule Spoleto was burned in 1160 and Barbarossa sent a warning declaration to Assisi that he considered the city and its territory as imperial property, and forbidding anyone to build a new castle in the district, on these terms the Assisians could consider themselves free and could count on the Emperor's favour. An interesting document of that year makes mention of a donation by a priest of the cathedral who made over all his possessions for the use of "all free men and of the churches," asking that they should be defended by the people of Assisi. Here we catch a glimpse of the self-consciousness of the people, as well as a deep-seated wish to be free on their own terms and not on the Emperor's!

Not very long after this-about two years-Milan fell to the imperial troops, its walls were razed, and the bodies of the Three Kings were carried off in triumphal procession to Cologne. The Holy See at that time was divided between a pope and anti-pope, but when the Emperor invited both to a synod in Pavia presided over by himself, Pope Alexander III retorted that no emperor had the right to preside over a council of the Church and Barbarossa was excommunicated. Barbarossa descended upon Rome and was crowned emperor by his anti-pope, but the Roman son fought for Alexander, the Germans were laid low with fever and had to retreat, and the anti-Pope fled: the advantage was with Alexander.

All this heartened the Lombard cities, the walls of Milan were rebuilt, the northern city-states, the powerful Norman rulers of Sicily, the rulers of the Byzantine empire and the Pope were all drawn together in their hostility to Frederick who

suffered his most severe defeat at Legnano in 1176. When he met the Pope in Venice in the following year, Barbarossa knelt to receive the kiss of peace, and for the moment it really looked as though the question, "Does the Emperor hold his crown as the Pope's vassal?" had been at least temporarily settled.

Three years earlier the imperial Chancellor had been sent to take possession of Assisi, which he did by force of arms. Evidently Barbarossa did not feel sure of the efficacy of his earlier declaration, and wished to keep the valley of Spoleto firmly in hand. On his next visit he came to Assisi in person and occupied the newly enlarged and fortified castle. The overlordship of Assisi was conferred on Conrad of Luetzen, a kinsman of the Hohenstaufen who was created Duke of Spoleto; and he too established himself in the Rocca Maggiore from which he ruled the city as an imperial fief. But the people of Assisi, who always delighted in nicknames, called the German troops "La Mosca nel Cervello," the fly in the brain.

Luck was on the Emperors side again when his son Henry married Constance, the heiress of Sicily, which the efficient Norman rule had provided with a strong army, navy and exchequer, and though the results of this were not immediate, they were far-reaching. The rest of Italy found itself sandwiched between the German forces coming in from the north, and an imperial stronghold in the south. More than ever the city-states were torn between rival powers and alliances which changed according to the varying fortune of each side: Guelph and Ghibelline had become realities.

Another reality was also coming into the foreground, for the victory of Legnano was a warning to feudal Europe that a new fighting class had arisen, ready when called on to

defend its rights. Another most powerful “C” had been added to the two already existing capital “C’s”: the life of every man and woman in Europe was being formed within the tremendous realities of Church, Castle, and Commune, each full of ideals and problems, each commanding its own loyalties, and they all affected every city and every citizen.

Such roughly was the state of affairs when Francis was born in 1182, just twelve years after the murder of Thomas a Becket. He was the child of the civilisation that surrounded him, absorbing much from it, and making a huge contribution in return. Socially he was the child of the Commune and of the rich commercial class that was growing up as one result of the Crusades, the child of a highly creative period, but some at least of the immediate influences were summed up in the prayer taught to Umbrian children, “Save my soul from the heresies of the Lombards, and my body from the ferocity of the Germans.”

Those children spoke a mixture of Umbrian-Italian and Latin, and Francis learnt French, for otherwise he could not have continually broken into French songs as is reported of him. The Assisi that little Francis knew was the typical mediaeval city enclosed within its walls, yet in close contact with the countryside, dominated by its castle the Rocca, its artists and artisans and merchants kept busy by the city’s self-sufficient life. For the children the year was punctuated by the colourful festivals of the Church and the Commune, they certainly joined in the Calendimaggio revels which ushered in the month of May, and played in the streets as the boys do today.

Those streets provided varied entertainment with strolling players, fairs, broils, and processions, and Francis may have heard that wandering preacher to whom the Tres Socii allude, and who greeted everyone with the words Pax et

Bonum. He was probably a disciple of Joachim of Flores, the famous Calabrian prophet and visionary who had predicted terrible disasters would precede the reign of the Holy Spirit, the age of peace. Many people were terrified and fascinated by Joachim's apocalyptic visions, but not so many heeded his words when he insisted that the only remedy for the present and future ills was a mending of life, and individual sanctity. He gave his followers the one command, "Love one another." Joachim's influence was great, but that of Francis was to prove far greater and thirty years later the greeting Pax et Bonum would be repeated all over Europe by all kinds of people because the spark of charity in the heart of one small boy in Assisi had been fanned into a great fire of love of God and of men. Francis claimed later that his greeting of peace had been revealed to him by God. In his day the Assisians were commonly divided into "Buonumomini" and "Uomini." It was a social distinction, but to Francis every man was "good," and his greeting was the same to all: "Good people, the Lord give you peace."

Before the coming of Francis, Assisi was not a distinguished place; it was one of many ancient and small Italian cities, yet in little over a hundred years Dante was to write of it as the Orient, so great was the light it had shed over the world, a light which still continues. Much remains of the city that Francis knew; and after seven hundred years we still expect to meet him at turns in the countryside, and in the terraced streets where the brown houses are intersected with vine trellises and are bright with flowers. Most precious of all surviving objects is the font in San Rufino where he and Saint Clare were baptized, and which is still in use; and they too must have prayed before the ancient Pietà which is still venerated in the cathedral as La Madonna del Pianto. Almost certainly they saw the same facade of San Rufino that we see; they too knew the churches of Santa Maria Maggiore, San Pietro, Santa Maria della Minerva, a former Roman

temple, and San Giacomo di Muro Rupto; they too climbed the castle hill to the Rocca Maggiore and to the smaller fortress of the Rocchicciuola; from the purely material point of view we often tread in their steps and see much of what they saw. The woods in the valley and on the hills, alas, have disappeared; the view remains, and it was while looking at these hills that Francis learnt to sing – for all of us – the Canticle of the Sun.

The blessing which he gave Assisi on his last journey to the Porziuncula is still active; how otherwise can the pervading sense of peace felt by multitudes be accounted for? It is not only the beauty, the light, the art, or anything material; it is a gift from Christ Himself given us through Francis and Clare.

The Early Years

It was on July 16, probably of 1194, that a daughter was born in an Assisi palace to Ortolana, the wife of Favorone. Before the child's birth Ortolana had prayed fervently in church before the crucifix, and had received the assurance, "Fear not for thou wilt safely give birth to a light which will shine on all the earth." And so, when the baby was baptized in the neighbouring cathedral of San Rufino, she was named Chiara.

About that time the Empress Constance dreamed that she would give birth to a fire-brand which would make of Italy a lighted torch, and on December 26, perhaps of that same year, either in Assisi or Jesi, her child was born, the son and heir of Emperor Henry VI. By some the baby was hailed as a future saviour. Merlin prophesied that he was the king who would unite East and West; but Joachim of Flores, that he would be the world's scourge and anti-christ. He was entrusted to the care of his kinsman Conrad of Luetzen in the castle of Assisi, and three years later he was baptized

Frederick, also in the font of San Rufino in the presence of fifteen cardinals and bishops; and one reason for so much ceremony may have been a wish to placate the Pope, for the child had already been recognized as king of the Germans. There were great festivities, and although the citizens looked on the castle with rather a sour eye, no doubt they were quite pleased to share in a “festa,” and fifteen-year-old Francesco Bernardone was not the lad to sit at home in the background.

No one that day could have dreamed of the closely interwoven destinies of the Assisi boy and girl, or how the life story of the baby prince would constantly touch that of the other two.

Favorone was a feudal noble but the surname of Scefi given him by later biographers has no historical sanction: indeed authentic information about Clare’s family is scarce. Favorone is known to have been lord of the castle of Coccorano on Monte Aldone above the Chiagio valley on the boundary of the Assisan territory; he has also been called lord of Sassorosso on Monte Subasio, but if his family ever owned that castled crag it was before 1177 when Barbarossa gave the property to the Ghisleris.

There is frequent mention of a Monaldo, probably a brother of Favorone, who appears as the head of the family and a leader in political and domestic affairs. These people “were rich in all things that were accounted riches in the land wherein they dwelt,” and they also owned a palace in Assisi within a few paces of San Rufino. Pietro di Damiano, a witness in the cause of Clare’s canonisation, says that “Madonna Chiara was of noble birth,” and that the family included “seven knights, all noble and powerful,” to which Messer Ranieri di Bernardo adds that Madonna Chiara belonged to the most illustrious families of Assisi, both on

the side of her father and of her mother.” The family name of her mother is uncertain; tradition has called it Fiumi. All these feudal nobles were of very mixed descent; there may have been a Lombard strain in the families of Favorone and Ortolana; at any rate the Lombard women were famous for their wonderful golden hair, and such hair was one of Clare’s beauties.

A family with seven knights was immersed in the full tide of chivalry, and its counterpart could have been found in any part of Europe, living by the same code, with the same ideals and prejudices, enjoying the same sports and songs, having the same defects. Politically the feudal nobility of Assisi favoured the empire of which they were the vassals, and their loyalty was reinforced by an iron determination to maintain their privileges against what they considered the encroachments of the other citizens, merchants, and artisans, the Populo Minuto, who were becoming so conscious of growing power and widening needs.

In 1198 Innocent III became pope, with his heart set upon reforms in the Church and upon opposing the imperial rule in Italy, a worthy follower of Gregory VII. A year previously Henry VI had died, and at the age of four Frederick was crowned king of the Sicilian kingdom, with the Pope and his mother as his guardians, but the latter also died in that same year. Innocent therefore found himself regent of Sicily for Frederick the golden-haired “Boy from Apulia,” who, even as a child, “would only follow the dictates of his own will,” and learnt to assert his independence very early.

For the moment, however, Innocent could direct events; his cry was “Italia” and one of his first actions was to call upon Conrad of Luetzen to renounce the duchy of Spoleto in favour of the Holy See. Conrad appears to have made no difficulty; perhaps he realized that resistance would have

been ineffective; anyhow he fled, and the Assisians enthusiastically seized the opportunity to tear down part of the castle as a protest against the imperial claims, economically using the stones to build a new city wall. The first consul of Assisi, one of the Bombarone family, issued a decree, dated 1198, which was announced in San Rufino no longer in the name of the emperor, but in that of the Blessed Trinity.

This was but another assertion of the growing power of the Commune; and desultory fighting went on throughout the countryside between the opponents and supporters of the new regime, and the feudal Ghibellines could no longer count on immediate imperial help. Things came to a head when in the January of 1200 Girardo di Gislerio, the lord of Sassorosso, made his submission to the Commune of Perugia. It was a tremendous insult to Assisi that an Assisian nobleman should join the hereditary enemy; and when a number of other nobles followed suit, tempers rose to boiling pitch. The castle of Sassorosso was sacked and destroyed by the Assisians who also vented their fury on every feudal possession they could reach. In the alliances and counter-alliances of its cities the valley of Spoleto became a miniature picture of the whole of Italy, and the feudal nobles who had gone over to Perugia did their best to foment the feeling against Assisi.

Among the list of these there is a Monaldo, and considering that the family property of Coccorano was on the boundary between Perugia and Assisi, it seems certain that he was indeed the brother of Favorone. It follows logically that none of the family could have remained in Assisi, and the first care would have been to remove them to Perugia: this seems to be irrefutably confirmed by the contemporary documents.

In Perugia the children whose fathers were brother knights and of the same political opinions, naturally became playmates; and it is extremely likely that thus began the friendship of three little girls, Chiara, Filippa di Gislerio, and Benvenuta, who belonged to a noble family of Perugia. Let us enlarge the circle and look at these children grouped round Ortolana: besides Clare and her two friends there are her sisters, Penanda, Agnese, and Beatrice; perhaps her brother Martino; as well as two kinswomen, Pacifica and Bona Guelfuccio. They little dreamed that they were the nucleus of a great religious order, and that all of them except Martino, Penanda, and Bona would end their lives with Clare in San Damiano, the first convent of Poor Clares.

In those early days, however, Ortolana was still the central figure in the group, a great feudal lady, devout, expert in ordering her household, and with considerable experience of life. She had travelled to the Holy Land, probably following her husband on the Crusade, for the crusading armies were habitually encumbered with crowds of non-combatants. She had seen Jerusalem and Bethlehem before they were lost to the Christians, a disaster which filled Europe with dismay and strengthened the will to recover them. She could describe the Holy Places making the children see them through her eyes; she could tell of the great leaders, Richard, Tancred, Godfrey, and of how and where they had fought; she knew the disunion of the Crusaders, their dangers and difficulties, at first hand. Like many others those children of Assisi and Perugia must often have played at Crusades, the most wonderful adventure in the world which had the cross as its banner and as its war-cry, *Dieu le vent*. Every crucifix pleaded for the liberation of the Holy Places as well as for the virtues of Christian chivalry. It was as a knight of the cross that feudal children heard of Saint John Gualbert of Florence who, when his brother's murderer appealed to him for mercy in the name of Christ, forgave the

injury. At that time John Gualbert was a knight, and when he parted from the murderer and entered the church of San Miniato, the Figure on the cross bowed its head before him. Christ had bowed His head because a knight had obeyed Him and forgiven his enemy: could it happen again? Each carved or painted cross the children saw must have seemed to answer "yes."

Besides her journey to the Holy Land, Ortolana had also been in pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles in Rome, and to the sanctuary of Saint Michael on Monte Gargano. This round was the chief recognized pilgrimage of that time referred to colloquially as "Deus, Angelas et Homo."

Mediaeval people felt the battle between good and evil spirits as a tremendous reality going on all round them, and Saint Michael was not only the leader of the hosts of heaven and men's most powerful protector, but also the patron of every Christian knight and warrior. Rome had been saved once from the Barbarians when Saint Michael appeared on the wall of Hadrian and the Castel Sant' Angelo bore his name: and when in the fifth century he appeared in a cave on Monte Gargano in Apulia it became one of the chief sanctuaries of Europe to which people flocked from France, Spain, Portugal, England, Ireland, Poland, Hungary, Germany, and even from much farther afield. The immense veneration for Saint Michael made it customary to fast for forty days in his honour during August and September; every country built sanctuaries to the Archangel; France had its Mont Saint Michel, England, Saint Michael's Mount.

Ortolana directed the education of her daughters according to that of their time and class. The advice given to parents by Lapo di Ser Pace was "if the child be a girl set her to sew and not to read unless she wishes to become a nun." Clare does not seem to have had any thoughts of being a nun but

she certainly learnt to read, and judging from her letters, to write, and we know what a needlewoman she was, for the alb made by her and preserved in Santa Chiara in Assisi is one of the most beautiful examples of mediaeval handiwork, only possible to fingers which had always held a needle.

Clare was also talented for music to which she remained very sensitive all through her life. Like Romanesque art, the music of the Church had reached a wonderful fullness of beauty; and besides that of the actual liturgy there were many lovely sequences and songs, for instance those of Gauthier de Coincy which she certainly must have known. There were also the songs of the Troubadours, both French and Italian, there were the popular songs of Umbria, and melodies and dance tunes played on little portable organs, on the *vielle* and the lute and the pipes. It was an age of much singing and much playing.

No chronicler has thought of telling us how far little girls of the castle were allowed to go scrambling after flowers in the spring woods, but certainly flowers were another love of Clare's, and one which she carried with her to San Damiano.

As Ortolana looked at her daughter she must often have wondered how the prophecy about her would be fulfilled. The child was naturally pious and inclined to prayer, even to solitary prayer, though she does not seem to have been a spiritual prodigy. She liked to count her prayers – as was a common custom – upon stones strung on a cord for that purpose: such strings were called *Pater Nosters* and probably Ortolana and the children would recite these prayers together. Almsgiving, too, came naturally to Clare: she was sensitive to the needs of others, and always ready to give her sweets to poor children; this generosity grew on her and became proverbial.

The war which had uprooted Favorone's family ended with a victory for Perugia, and it is quite possible that the first time Francesco's name was mentioned in Clare's home was when someone repeated the boast of one of the Assisi prisoners who was asked why he was so gay in the Perugia prison and answered: "Because I see the day when the whole world will bow down before me." If there was any comment, it would have been a gust of scornful laughter for that young wind-bag, Francesco Bemardone. Yet something else had also been noticed – his power of reconciling people who did not get on together.

In 1203 a peace had been patched up, not only between Assisi and Perugia, but also between the conflicting Assisi factions of the Majores and Minores, and a couple of years later the self-exiled Assisi nobles returned to their homes. It had been stipulated that the Commune was to restore their property and indemnify them for damages. Clare was then nine, already lovely and radiating the joy of spring-time, a characteristic which remained with her all through life.

The household of Monaldo and Favorone and Ortolana had returned to the palace in the Piazza di San Rufino, and Clare saw her own city almost for the first time. Her home was mediaevally luxurious with lavish entertaining: visitors came and went constantly; and the children grew up accustomed to the talk, happenings, and amenities of feudal life. Tournaments had come into fashion, and Folgore di San Gimignano gives us a picture which more or less would fit into the setting of any city:

Provençal songs and dances that surpass,
And quaint French mumblings: and through the hollow brass
A sound of German music in the air.

In other words, troubadours and jongleurs from France and minnesingers and minstrels from Germany were everywhere welcome, and something of the pleasures of the grown-ups trickled through to the children.

The Rocca of Assisi was empty, Barbarossa already a legend, but the Pope and German princes were still wrangling over the regency of the Two Sicilies which Innocent claimed as Frederick's guardian. The Norman Walter de Brienne was in command of the papal forces in the south, and to many he appeared as a hero fighting for the Church and for the final overthrow of the German rule in Italy. Among the Assisians who set out to join him was Francis Bernardone: probably everyone knew of the fine kit given him by his father, and how he had handed it on to a poor and very shabby knight.

Nothing is known of the sympathies of Clare's family during those years, and whether any of the seven knights were with the crusading armies which busily sacked Constantinople instead of trying to free the Holy Places. Local excitement was aroused in 1204 when the Assisians elected Giraldo di Gilberto as podestà, regardless of the fact that he was an excommunicated heretic: and as a show of independence they decided to keep him in office notwithstanding a protest by the Pope. This infuriated Innocent who laid the city under an interdict, whereupon the Assisians reconsidered the matter, got rid of the heretic, elected a new podestà, and fifty of the most important citizens did homage to the papal rector of the duchy of Spoleto. The interdict was raised, but Innocent passed Assisi by when he was next travelling in the district. An interesting detail of the quarrel is that the precocious Frederick II sent the Assisians a message of benevolent encouragement, a sign that local politics were watched with interest.

Something else, however, was happening which began to capture the interest in Assisi where everyone knew everyone else.

Pietro Bernardone the upright and successful cloth merchant was a familiar figure, respected by all, and indeed he was described by his contemporaries as “reipublicae benefactor et provisor.” His son was a “king of the revels,” conspicuous for his princely extravagance and also for his courtesy to everyone, and there must have been plenty of gossip when having set out as a would-be warrior he suddenly returned home from Spoleto. Soon there was much more to gossip about, for young Francis appeared completely changed and was behaving in the maddest fashion. His squandering had taken a new line; he was going about dressed like a beggar, pursued by jeers and stones, and someone in Monaldo’s household may easily have seen a simpleton fling his cloak on the ground for Francis the beggar to walk on. The whole of Assisi was roused when Messer Pietro sued his son in the Bishop’s court for the restitution of his stolen goods, and the son had answered him by throwing not only the money, but all his clothes at his father’s feet. No doubt there was considerable sympathy for Pietro when he left the court “full of anger and sorrow for he greatly loved him.”

Was Clare’s imagination first touched when she heard of the naked, rich young man wrapped in the Bishop’s cloak, and then going out penniless into the world to start a new life?

Other news followed, for the young madman was constantly met begging for stones to help with the restoration of country chapels. In later life Clare recalled one particular scene so vividly that one feels the impression it had made in her young, enthusiastic mind. In her Testament she thanks God for the blessings which reached her both before and after her conversion “through his beloved servant our Father

Francis. Quite soon after his conversion before he had any disciples or friends, he prophesied concerning us what God in due time brought to pass. It was when the man of God was restoring San Damiano, the church in which, completely entranced by divine consolation, he had been impelled to leave the world and worldly things, enlightened by the Holy Spirit in a transport of joy he leaped on to a wall, and from it addressed some peasant folk who were standing near, speaking in a high tone and in the French tongue, 'Come and help me in the work on this convent, for here there will dwell devout women, and our heavenly Father shall be glorified throughout the length and breadth of His Church by the sweet odour of their conversation.'"

Another great stir was made among the Assisians when Bernardo di Quintavalle gave away all his possessions and became a beggar like Francis for love of Christ. And this first follower of Francis is described as "one of the richest, wisest and most noble citizens of Assisi." Many rich and powerful people would soon be following this example. The next recruit was Pietro Catani, a canon of the cathedral, who chose to leave a position of established authority; Sylvester, a priest, and Giles, a peasant, followed, and not long afterwards Favorone's kinsman Rufino joined the new group. Giles spoke for thousands when he exclaimed, "Brother Francis, I want to be with you for love of God." Francis had drawn a good deal closer to the palace in the cathedral piazza, but no one in that house can have dreamed of the impending threat to the family's ambition, and that it would come through the eldest daughter.

By that time Clare was sixteen, and a beauty: her "face was oval, her forehead spacious, her colour dazzling, and her eyebrows and hair very fair. A celestial smile played in her eyes and round her mouth, her nose was well fashioned and slightly aquiline; of good stature she inclined to stoutness,

but nowise in excess." That was how her contemporaries described her. She charmed all with her looks and with her kindness, for everyone in trouble knew that this radiant girl would always help them if she could; in this she was following her mother's teaching and example, and probably the men of the family did not mind her reputation for charity. None suspected the hair-shirt which she wore beneath her fine clothes. Wherever she passed, people turned to look at her, and all wondered whom she would marry. Knowing what an asset they held, her family were determined she should make a 'magnificent marriage to some great and powerful lord of her own rank.' There was no reason for delay; but Clare strenuously opposed any such plans. She was born to love with the whole strength of her being, but when repeatedly pressed to make up her mind, "she gave an evasive answer and committed her virginity to God."

Messer Ranieri di Bernardo, who was her cousin and a witness in the cause of her canonization, declared "since Clare was beautiful the question of her marriage was discussed, and many of her relations pressed her to marry, but she would in no wise consent; and having myself pressed this on her repeatedly she would not allow the matter to be mentioned." Another neighbour, Pietro di Damiano, adds, "she would in no wise be persuaded."

In after-years successive popes were to find themselves no match for Clare's tenacity when once she was convinced of the rightness of her cause.

It is difficult to establish exactly at what moment Clare came into personal contact with Francis; we have to bear in mind the double story of the girl in the palace and the doings of the new fraternity.

In 1210, having received a first permission from the Pope for their way of life, the brothers were wandering through the countryside preaching, and everywhere the listeners were struck by their light-heartedness. When asked who they were the brothers answer was, "We are men of Assisi who live a life of penance." Those were the days when Frederick's rival, Otto IV, passed down the valley of Spoleto on his way to Rome where he hoped to be crowned. Francis felt entitled to send him a warning of the evanescence of all earthly dignity: within two years Otto had to hurry back to Germany in a vain attempt to save his crown; and Frederick was elected German emperor. Francis' warning would then have been remembered and quoted.

In Assisi itself the tide of mocking insults had ebbed; and Francis was being invited to preach in San Giorgio, where he had been to school, and in the cathedral. Some years later Thomas of Spoleto described that preaching; "When I was a student in Bologna I saw Francis preach in the market place where nearly all the citizens were gathered . . . the whole of his discourse was to assuage enmities and to make for peace. His habit was dirty, his appearance insignificant, his face not handsome, but God gave such power to his word that many families between whom were old feuds and spilled blood were induced to make peace. All felt such devotion and reverence for him that men and women precipitated themselves upon him and tried to tear off bits of his habit, or even to touch its hem." Such scenes were probably often repeated. Other listeners reported: "He began to preach wonderfully of despising the world, and of holy penance and voluntary poverty, and for the desire for the kingdom of God, and the self-stripping of Christ in His Passion," while again others declared, "He seemed to those who beheld him as a man from another world, whose heart was set on Heaven, and his face turned upwards towards it seeking to draw others upwards with him." Even in reading

the words we feel something of what that fascination must have been.

Francis once said, "What are the servants of God but His singers whose duty it is to lift up the hearts of men and women and move them to spiritual joy?" Unconsciously he had described himself, and the secret of his irresistible charm, for joy is the greatest gift one man can give to another. The hearers felt how that preacher saw each person, each creature as a unique creation, a child of God, and therefore a being worthy of respect, courtesy, and charity. Crowds flocked to see the former king of the revels, now penniless and ragged and happy; they hung on the words that tumbled over each other in his wonderful voice, and they knew that he and his brothers practised what they preached. They recognized that these men had every right to preach the beauty of poverty since they lived it, every right to preach charity since their chief care was for the worst cases among the lepers, every right to cry "peace" for they were at peace with all men "for the love of God."

"Good people, God give you peace" was their greeting to everyone, a greeting Francis claimed to have been revealed to him by God. Peace was the gift of Christ which Christians held in trust in an age of strife. In Assisi acute rivalry existed between the two classes of the Majores and Minores, but when Francis chose the name of Minores, the Lesser Brothers, for himself and his companions it was not out of any conventional humility, but because the way shown by Christ was to be humble and subject to all." The Three Companions could later report, "Therefore all Assisi wept tears of compassion over the Passion of Christ, and nobles and plebeians, clerics and lay-folk threw aside the thought of passing things to walk in the way shown them." Through the influence of Francis and his fraternity the treaty of civic

peace which had been drafted in 1203 was solemnly ratified in November, 1210.

All this gives us an idea of the place Francis had taken in Clare's life even before she met him: each knew the other by sight and by repute, and surely Rufino must have acted as a link. Of course, Clare wanted to know him personally, and Francis was equally anxious to meet her for Celano tells us, "He, God's huntsman, was minded to snatch this noble booty from the world and to offer it to his Master. And so he visited her and many times she visited him, coming forth from her home in secret with an intimate female friend."

This friend was her kinswoman, Bona Guelfuccio, who recorded how together they sought out Francis at the Porziuncula "secretly so that no one should see her," which incidentally cannot have been too easy, and that Clare listened to him "with the utmost fervour whenever he spoke of the love of Jesus." It was his favorite subject and "always Francis was occupied with Jesus: Jesus he carried in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, Jesus in all his members." Often he forgot where he was and what he was doing at the thought of Jesus, "and with such glowing love was he moved towards Jesus Christ, yea, and with such intimate love did his Beloved repay this, that it seemed to the servant of God himself that he felt his Saviour almost continually before his eyes.

Everything spoke to Francis of his Beloved; Christ the Corner-stone, Christ the Lamb of God, Christ the Light of the world, Christ the Water slaking all thirst, Christ the Bread and Wine of life, Christ the Vine, Christ the Way. He could hardly bear to put out a candle or see bread carelessly wasted or water polluted, all for love of Christ. He wanted a plot of land set aside for the cultivation "of our brothers the flowers so that all who see them shall remember the eternal

Sweetness. Christ, the creating Word, was in all creatures and shone in all beauty, Christ the Pilgrim met him in every stranger, Christ the Crucified in every sufferer, the Risen Christ in all life. Francis must have talked to Clare and Bona very much in the spirit of the prayer attributed to him, "I beseech Thee, O Lord, that the fiery and sweet strength of Thy love may absorb my soul from all things under Heaven, and may I die for love of Thy love, even as Thou didst die for love of my love."

All the Gospel for Francis was glad tidings of love personified in Jesus, and with what insistence he must have repeated to those two the passages that had decided his own and his brothers' vocations. He showed them how the Franciscan life was "to observe the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ owning nothing and in chastity." It was Clare's hitherto half-conscious ideal being put before her as a practical reality; and "enlightened by the flaming torch of his speech, she caught, as it were, a glimpse of the Beatific Vision. Forthwith the things of the world seemed to her as dung, and dreading the allurements of the flesh, she resolved to lay aside all thought of earthly marriage, and to do her utmost to render herself worthy of the espousals of the heavenly King, and henceforward she regarded Blessed Francis as, after God, the charioteer of her soul."

Clare's mind was made up, and she took her decision with the clear sight and single-mindedness of youth. How many martyrs were under twenty? Throughout her life she saw the wonders of God opening on earth to those men and women "who have the courage to leave on one side the goods of this world and its vanities." Courage was one of her chief characteristics.

In the bull of canonization Alexander IV says that, after the meeting with Francis, Clare sold her possessions and

distributed the proceeds among the poor. She must have done it very cleverly, for even then it aroused no suspicion in her family: perhaps they thought it wiser to humour what they hoped was a passing whim. Bona Guelfuccio later related how Clare had once sent her to “the brothers who were working at Santa Maria degli Angeli in order that they should buy some meat.” Perhaps someone was ill; anyhow this shows the same practical solicitude for other people that distinguished her as abbess of her own community.

A legend that she also begged in the streets seems quite incredible, for that could not have gone unobserved, unless we accept the explanation that an angel saved her from recognition. Otherwise her relations would certainly have risen in wrath against such behaviour.

One thing is certain and that is that Bishop Guido must have known what was preparing both in Francis’ and Clare’s minds, otherwise Francis would never have dared to act as he did. The legend of the Three Companions insists that he did nothing without the Bishop’s permission and consent, which is entirely in keeping with his whole attitude towards the clergy. Bishop Guido was the proved father and friend of Francis and the Fraternity, and he must have been consulted about the very delicate matter of Clare’s vocation.

She had reached the point when waiting was intolerable, and Celano tells us that “as it drew near to Palm Sunday the girl Clare came to Francis in ardent expectation desiring to know how and when her conversion could be finally accomplished; and he commanded her that, dressed in her habitual clothes she should go as usual to receive the blessed palm together with all the faithful. In the following night she would set out from her family home, and turn from all the joys of the world to weep for the Passion of Christ. When therefore it came to be Palm Sunday, she appeared

among the women resplendent for the joy that shone in her, and merrily she entered the church with her companions. There it befell her according to God's providence for when the moment came for all to approach the altar and receive the blessed olive Clare was held back by shyness. Seeing this the Bishop came down the steps to where she was and put the palm in her hand." This gesture illuminates both him and Clare; and they must have felt how wonderfully appropriate the Palm Sunday liturgy was for what only they knew to be her marriage day. She was setting out with Christ, and, as the processional hymn echoed round the church, each verse must have lifted Clare's heart in a wave of worshipping love. "Thy praise in heaven the host angelic sings, on earth mankind and all created things, glory and praise to Thee Redeemer blest, Rex bone, Rex clemens cui bona cuncta placent, Hosanna in excelsis." Only the Bishop could understand her moment of shyness before what was so tremendous, and he placed the olive blessed to strengthen and defend in her hand, as the sacred sign of divine grace confirming her vocation.

Celano continues the story, "In the following night having prepared herself to obey the saint's command, she fled from her father's home with one trusted companion, and, not wishing to leave by the chief door, with miraculous strength she opened a side door heavily shut and barred with stones and wooden beams. Thus she left her family, home, and city, and with great fervour went to Santa Maria degli Angeli where the friars were keeping watch and singing the divine praises."

Other accounts supply some supplementary details. Her companion was Pacifica Guelfuccio, for Bona was away in Rome; and the Paschal moon was already full shining on the fruit trees in flower as the two hurried down the mile and a half to where Francis, Rufino, and Filippo were waiting with

lighted torches. Singing the Veni Creator Spiritus they went into the chapel where the other Knights of Francis' Round Table were waiting, and Clare knelt before the altar and made her profession, "I want only Jesus Christ, and to live by the Gospel owning nothing and in chastity." To seal this vow Francis cut off her long fair hair, her fine clothes were taken off, and he gave her the rough habit of poverty and covered her head with the white veil of chastity and the coarse black one of penance. Clare had listened to the voice bidding her leave her people and her father's house: in the Porziuncula she met the Bridegroom who had chosen her. All present knew that the little ancient chapel had ever been a place of visions, where the presence of our Lady was often seen, and angels could be heard singing her praises and those of Christ. It was the perfect place for the consecration of Clare, and for the birth of the second Franciscan Order; and in the Porziuncula that scene is still alive, and the vibrations of it have never died. Immediately after the ceremony Francis took her to the Benedictine monastery at Bastia.

When Clare's flight was discovered the furious consternation of her family knew no bounds. They were not bad people, nor necessarily irreligious, but their values were of this world, and like Pietro Bernardone they were those left behind who could not keep up with the pace of saints. The scandal was enormous; and everyone said exactly what they would say to-day were the circumstances repeated. Except to the few who could understand, Francis, Clare, and all concerned appeared headstrong, selfish, and unscrupulous. It is curious that in the ensuing hubbub there is no mention of Favorone, only of Monaldo, and though there is no positive proof, this suggests that Clare's father was dead.

As soon as her whereabouts were known the men of the family besieged the convent, "their hearts tom, and greatly disapproving of what she had done, and what she meant to

do." From their own point of view they were justified; they would not allow that Clare at eighteen had the right to choose something which they considered preposterous, and they tried persuasion, threats, and every means to get her back, "and make her renounce this dishonour which is bringing shame on our family, and has no equal in the whole neighbourhood."

Clare had to defend herself from being dragged away by force, and she clung to the altar in the chapel; there at least no one could touch her without committing sacrilege. At last to convince her relations that nothing would move or change her she uncovered her shorn head; after that Monaldo and his followers knew they were beaten and turned away.

The nuns may have been shaken by these scenes disturbing their Holy Week; anyhow Clare was removed to another Benedictine convent of Sant' Angelo in Panso, really Sant' Angelo della Pace, on the slopes of Monte Subasio. Francis, Bernard, and Philip went with her, and as they walked through the budding woods with the ground covered with spring flowers, something very like the Canticle of the Sun must have been on their lips, for there was never a moment when Francis was not praising God for some gift. Praise, preferably in song, was the life of the Fraternity. It would have been the first lesson he would have wished to inculcate into the Second Order!

Whether that walk took place by sun or torchlight, it may quite well have been an occasion for Francis' words: "In the morning when the sun rises, all men should praise God who created it for our use, for by it all things are made visible. Then in the evening we must praise God for Brother Fire who gives light to our eyes in the darkness. For we are all like the blind, but God gives us light by these two brothers."

Within a few days of Clare's arrival at Panso, she was joined by her younger sister Agnes, another runaway into the arms of Christ and Poverty; and their relations stormed with increased fury, as indeed was only natural. It was intolerable that these girls should throw away all their chances of advancing the family fortunes, and only bring shame on their clan by flinging themselves into a new-fangled movement and so-called fraternity with no decent standing, and associated with the lowest social class. If Clare and Agnes insisted on taking the veil, they could do so in a respectable Benedictine community of which in due course Clare could become abbess. It was bad enough that Rufino should join a company of beggars, but this was a thousand times worse, and the family pride and ambition were cut to the quick.

Again the men headed by Monaldo set out hot-foot and furious to fetch Agnes home. They entered the courtyard of Panso coldly demanding to see her, coldly and roughly asked her what she thought she was doing, adding a command to go with them. Agnes answered that she would never leave Clare. They dragged her to the gate while she screamed for help, "Christ my Lord, save me." Clare fell on her knees while the peasants came running up at the sound of the tumult. By this time Agnes was lying on the ground, hardly conscious, her clothes torn; but when one of the men tried to lift her to her feet, that fifteen-year-old girl proved to be so heavy that no one could move her. The men had to give it up; they turned away, and Clare knew the battle was over.

Francis desire had been "that the dust of worldliness should not dim the mirror of Claret immaculate spirit . . . and for this reason he hastened to draw her away from the darkness of the world." The first great step had been taken, and

following him Clare, and now Agnes, had “abandoned the world,” and started on a new life.

San Damiano

After her shall virgins he brought to
the King . . . they shall be brought
with gladness and rejoicing.

– *Psalm 94, Office of Saint Clare*

The Benedictines were staunch friends of Francis: the abbot of, San Benedetto on Monte Subasio had given him the Porziuncula with the one condition that the chapel should always be considered the mother church of the Fraternity, so Francis had had that reason too for wishing Clare’s consecration to take place there. He had also received from the abbot the tiny mountain chapel known as the Carceri which was used by the Subasio shepherds and became one of his favourite and earliest hermitages.

It was now the turn of the Benedictine Dames; and they sheltered Clare and Agnes and gave them their first experience of the religious life. The weeks spent among them must have been of immense spiritual and practical help to the girls who, however full of the enthusiasm of love of God, had still to learn how a community was ordered.

From Francis’ first meeting with Clare he had almost certainly connected her with San Damiano, which for him must have been as blessed a place as the Porziuncula, and where each sight of the crucifix hanging from the vault brought back to him the sound of our Lord’s own voice, “Francis go, and repair my church.” As usual he turned to the Bishop for help and advice: the priest who had been in charge of San Damiano was dead, the chapel was standing empty, and even materially Francis work of restoration to

the building had given him some sort of claim on it, had he ever wished to claim anything! Anyhow the Bishop put it at his disposal for the Sisters who were soon joined by Pacifica Guelfuccio, Benvenuta, Filippa di Leonardo Gisleri, and Cristiana di Bernardo da Suppo. San Damiano had become a magnet; and one after another the richest families of Assisi saw their daughters cast away all worldly advantages to follow Clare. In her own words: "Thus by the will of God, and our blessed father Francis, we came to dwell in the church of San Damiano, where soon the Lord, in His mercy and grace multiplied us in order that what had been foretold by His holy one, should be fulfilled; for we had sojourned in another place, but only for a short time."

At first Francis gave them a very simple rule, and it was only after a couple of years or so that Clare reluctantly took office as abbess, promising him obedience. Later she referred to this primitive rule saying: "Our blessed father moved by pity gave us a written form of life in this way"; and she incorporated at least a fragment of it in her own rule. In a letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague, Gregory IX described it as a "draught of milk"; but it was sufficient for the moment, and for Clare its most precious clause was that in which Francis promised that he and his brothers would always provide for the spiritual and material needs of the Sisters. Thus he acknowledged the union of the two Franciscan families, and it always remained Clare's ideal.

To Francis and Clare, from the beginning and always, Poverty was the key-note of their vocation, and Celano relates: "Wishing her order to bear the name of Poverty, Clare made a petition to Pope Innocent III of holy memory begging for this privilege, and he was greatly gladdened at the fervour of this virgin, and said that no one had ever asked the Holy See for such a singular privilege. And in order that no one should scorn this concession, he wrote the first letter with

his own hand.” This statement has been questioned: there is no record of such a document in the Vatican archives, the first surviving papal letter about the Poor Ladies being the Bull *Litterae* Time of Honorius III, written to Cardinal Ugolino in 1218, granting San Damiano exemption from episcopal control. Yet, would Celano have been mistaken about something so important? Clare herself in her Testament – if this is accepted as genuine – repeats that Innocent III, “in whose pontificate we began,” granted her the privilege of poverty. That was in 1215 or 1216, and for the rest of her life Clare took her stand upon it.

During those first years the community was not officially enclosed; and the Sisters seem to have gone out on works of charity. Certainly Celano says that Saint Clare never left San Damiano during her forty-two years of religious life, but even this statement does not disprove the story of her visit to the Porziuncula which is first told in the *Actus* and *Fioretti*, but not by Celano. It is true that his life of Saint Clare is the older by some seventy years, but it is quite likely that the story of this episode may have been among the writings of the first companions of Saint Francis which Brother Leo left at San Damiano. The publication of these stories depended largely on the fluctuating opinions in the Order, and the dependence of the Poor Ladies on the Friars Minor quickly became a burning question in which this particular episode was of great importance.

At any rate during the first years of Clare’s life in San Damiano there was no reason of enclosure to prevent her absenting herself for a few hours; and during those early spring days of the Fraternity, before the formality of organisation had become necessary, why should Clare not have expressed the wish that the Brothers and Sisters should share a meal as a symbol of their joint vocation in Christ? Francis emphasized the sacramental aspect of the

meeting by deciding that it should take place at Santa Maria degli Angeli, the place which of all others held a sacramental meaning in the life of the Fraternity. Celano tells that, soon after the Brothers arrived there, a devout man had a vision of a multitude kneeling round the chapel and everyone was blind. Loudly and pitiably with clasped hands and upturned eyes they besought God for sight; suddenly a wonderful radiance shone from the sky, and all eyes were opened. Some people and places are chosen by God to bring light to others: Francis, Clare, and the Porziuncula are among them.

This is how the story is told in the Fioretti:

When Saint Francis was in Assisi he often visited Saint Clare giving her holy counsel. She greatly desired once to eat with him; but though she begged this of him many times he would never grant her this consolation. Seeing this desire of Saint Clare, Saint Francis' companions said to him: "Father, it seems to us that such strictness is not in accord with divine charity, and that thou should'st deny to Sister Clare, so holy a virgin, beloved of God this small favour of eating with thee, all the more since it was through thy preaching that she abandoned riches and the pomp of the world. Is it not true that if she asked of thee a greater favour than this is thou would'st have to grant it to her who is thy spiritual plant?" Then Saint Francis answered: "Does it seem to you that I ought to satisfy her request?" And the companions answered: "Yes Father; it is just that thou should'st give her this consolation."

Then Saint Francis said: "As it appears thus to you, so it appears to me: and in order that she may be the more consoled, I wish this meal to take place at Santa Maria degli Angeli, for she has long been shut up in San Damiano, and it will do her good to see Santa Maria once again, the place

where she was shorn and made the bride of Jesus Christ; and there we will eat together in the name of God.”

When the appointed day came, Saint Clare set out from the monastery with another sister and accompanied by the companions of Saint Francis they came to Santa Maria degli Angeli. When she had devoutly saluted the Blessed Virgin Mary before that altar where she had been shorn and had received the veil, the brothers took her to see all the place until it came to the hour for dinner. Meanwhile Saint Francis had the table set upon the bare ground even as was his custom to do. When it was dinner time Saint Francis and Saint Clare with one of his companions and with her companion sat down, and then all the other companions sat down too at the table with great humility. And with the first course Saint Francis began to speak of God so sweetly, so sublimely, so wonderfully that the abundance of divine grace descended upon them, and they were all rapt in God. And while they all remained thus in ecstasy with eyes and hands lifted up to Heaven the people of Assisi and Bettona and the surrounding countryside saw that the church at Santa Maria itself and the whole place and the wood all round it were burning fiercely, and the blaze was so great that it enveloped the church and the place and the wood. Then the people of Assisi rushed down in haste to quench the fire fearing that all would be burned. But when they reached the spot mid found no fire, they went in and found Saint Francis and Saint Clare and the whole company rapt in God in the ecstasy of contemplation even while they sat round that humble board. Then they understood that that what they had seen was spiritual and not material fire, which God had allowed to appear miraculously in order to make manifest that fire of divine love which burned in the souls of those holy friars and sisters; and these people went home with their hearts filled with great consolation and holy edification. After a long time when Saint Francis and Saint

Clare and their companions came to themselves they were so comforted with spiritual food that they cared little for any bodily nourishment.

Then when that blessed meal was ended, Saint Clare, worthily accompanied, returned to San Damiano; and when the other sisters saw her they were full of joy for they had feared that Saint Francis might have sent her to direct some other monastery as he had already sent her blessed sister Agnes to rule the monastery of Monticelli at Florence. Saint Francis had already said several times to Saint Clare: "Hold thyself ready in case it might be necessary for me to send you to another place": and she, the daughter of holy obedience had answered: "Father, I am always ready to go wherever you may send me." Therefore the sisters were very glad to see her back again; and ever after Saint Clare remained with great consolation in her heart. To the glory of Christ. Amen.

I cannot see why the historical foundation of this episode should be categorically denied, though the chief difficulty lies in the implied date of the visit. Agnes went to Florence in 1221, and three years earlier Cardinal Ugolino had compiled the rule for San Damiano which to a certain extent did enclose the nuns. This has to be borne in mind, though it is not conclusive. Psychologically the date rather justifies the story, for, after Francis' return from the East with the increasing pressure of difficulties within the Fraternity, both he and Clare, and she especially, must have wished to express the deep spiritual union between the First and Second Orders. As regards the meeting in itself, it is but one episode in lives full of wonders surpassing ordinary experience. Light plays a great part in the story of these lives; Francis was often seen surrounded by brilliant light, the sky over La Verna was aglow during the night of the Stigmata, often Clare's Sisters saw her in a radiance with

light round her head. Why should it have been impossible to God to open the eyes of those folk in Assisi to a light which was beyond that of the sun, and which was the fire of divine love in elected souls?

It has often been said that Clare loved Francis: of course she did; had he not kindled in her soul a twin flame of the love of God from that burning in his own, each flame adding something to the other? On this subject Sabatier wrote: "It is possible to meet souls . . . who are so pure, so little of this world that with one step they enter into the holy of holies, and once there, the thought of any other union would not be so much a fall as an impossibility. Such was the love of Saint Francis and Saint Clare."

There was another aspect of Francis' attitude to Clare, for it was his task to guide the Sisters in the path of evangelical perfection. He directed them in everything, and Celano stresses how strictly he insisted that the visiting friars should behave with the greatest circumspection. Brother Stephen reported: "Brother Francis would not suffer any woman to show him familiarity; blessed Clare was the only one for whom he seemed to have affection, but he never presumed to call even her by name and always spoke of her as "Christian woman." He was her spiritual director and in charge of her monastery, but he never ordered any other monastery to be founded, and when he heard that these were established and that the nuns were called Sisters, he was troubled and said: "The Lord has delivered us from wives, and now the devil has given us sisters." The Lord Ligolino of Ostia who was the Cardinal Protector of the Friars Minor and cherished these Sisters commended them to Saint Francis saying: "Brother, I commend these ladies to you," whereas the blessed man smiled and said, "Holy Father, let them no longer be called Sorores Minores, but as you call them Dominae."

Thus Clare and her Sisters acquired the name of Poor Ladies of San Damiano; in this title there is still an echo of Knights of the Round Table.

Francis explained his attitude still more definitely in the following parable: he always insisted that only friars of proved discretion should direct the Sisters: when one day he was reproached for not having gone to them himself, he declared that his affection was unchanged, but that in all things he wished to be an example, and he went on to tell of a king who sent two messengers to his promised bride. The first returned and only told of his mission; the second expatiated at length on the beauty of the queen. The king called back the first messenger and asked, "What of the queen? You have told me nothing about her." "Sire, she listened to me in silence and with great attention." "But what of her beauty?" "Sire, that is for you to judge of; my task was to deliver your message." And Francis commented: "If earthly kings can demand such an attitude from their servants, what can Christ not ask from his servants the Little Brothers when they carry His words to His brides."

Celano describes Clare as "noble by birth, but still more noble by grace, and she was of angelic purity. Though still young, she was mature before her time, fervent in the service of God, endowed with rare prudence and deepest humility, she was one of those great souls whom the human tongue cannot worthily praise."

These extraordinarily balanced qualities were all focused in the following of Christ with Francis along the path of poverty, obedience, and simplicity. She loved poverty as ardently as he did, and with the same vision, "for Poverty was Christ's faithful companion from his birth in a stable to His death and burial. . . . O, who would not love Lady Poverty above all things; of Thee, O Jesus, I ask to be signed with

this privilege, I long to be enriched with this treasure, I beseech of Thee, O most poor Jesus, that for Thy sake it may always be the mark of me and mine to possess nothing of our own under the sun." Clare fully shared Francis' feeling in this prayer, and had she but known it the struggle to maintain this poverty was to last till her death.

"He has never perfectly renounced the world who keeps hidden in his heart the treasure of his own will," taught Francis who aspired to share in the Christ-life by sharing in the perfect obedience of our Lord who came not to do His own will, but the will of His Father. It is far harder to renounce self-will than possessions. Francis pursued obedience as others pursue power, and with untiring ingenuity in finding the means of expressing it in action. The Three Companions tell how the Brothers placed themselves in the service of perfect obedience; as soon as an order was given they hastened to obey, not questioning whether it were just or unjust, accepting it as the will of God "and therefore it was sweet to them. The brothers in charity of spirit obey and serve each other, and this is the true obedience of Jesus Christ." Francis went still further, for he said: "Holy obedience makes a man subject to all the men in the world, and not to men alone, but also to all beasts and wild animals so that they may do with him whatsoever they will in so far as it may be granted to them from above by the Lord." This goes far beyond the ordinary human limits, but it was the ideal inculcated by Francis.

The passion for obedience had, as its twin, unbounded trust in God, and in men as the children of God; and all this was as active in Clare as it was in Francis, and formed the foundation of the Sisters' life in San Damiano.

Clare's first recorded miracle was one of trust. They had been there for about two years, dependent on alms for their

daily bread and for every necessity; therefore trust was of every day and every hour. There was no oil in the house, and that means much to Italians. Brother Bencivenga prepared to set out and beg; Clare washed out the flask and put it ready for him to take from the window ledge of the refectory. He found it full of oil, and wondered why he had been unnecessarily summoned.

In Francis and in Clare poverty and obedience were warmed with charity and humility, insisted on through never failing example. "Because he was the most humble of all, he was full of consideration for other men, and knew how to adapt himself to each. Among saints he was holier than they, among sinners as one of themselves; he showed himself as subject to all."

There is the famous story of Masseo who, after one of Francis' extraordinarily successful sermons, asked him: "I wonder why the whole world runs after thee more than others, and all men want to see and hear and obey thee? Thou art not fair of body, thou art not deeply learned, thou art not of noble birth; why does the whole world run after thee?"

When Saint Francis heard this, he rejoiced in his soul, and turned his eyes to heaven, and stood a long time thus with soul lifted up to God, and when he came to himself, he knelt down and gave thanks and praise to God and turned to Brother Masseo and said with great spiritual power:

You wish to know why this happens to me. I know it from the all-seeing God who sees the good and bad in all the earth. His most holy eyes have nowhere seen a greater, a more miserable, poorer sinner than I. Because in the whole world He found no more wretched being to do the wonderful work He wishes done, therefore He has chosen me, so as to put to

shame the noble, and the great, strength and beauty and worldly wisdom, that all may know that power and virtue come from Him alone and not from any creature, and that none can exalt themselves before His Face.

Such humility inevitably leads to a certain kind of fear; and a very illuminating story is told of a much esteemed Brother who left the Fraternity. His companions asked Francis why it had happened, and he replied: "I want to read something, and to ask myself some questions which I will answer; let no one speak to me till I have done." Then he repeated the words, "Chastity, Abstinence, Poverty" several times, asking himself after each, "Do you know that?" And he answered: "Yes, I know that." Finally he repeated the word "Fear. Do you know that? No." Again he cried out, "Fear, fear. Do you know that? NO. Fear, fear, fear," he repeated, and at last whispered, "Yes, I know fear," adding, "it is useless for a man to seek all the virtues and leave out fear; yet few have it and therefore it is hard to teach them. That good brother fell and left the order because he had no fear."

It was fear of his own self-will which, very early in their vocation, made Francis defer the decision concerning his own way of life to Clare and Sylvester. He was immensely attracted to the life of prayer, "the life of angels," he called it, withdrawn from the world in some remote hermitage, but he distrusted his own judgement. So he sent Masseo to the other two, begging for their prayer and advice. When Masseo returned Francis greeted him as a messenger of God, washing his feet and serving him while he ate. Then they went into the wood, and Francis knelt with his arms outstretched crosswise while Masseo told him that independently of each other, after long prayer, Clare and Sylvester had reached the same conclusion that his mission was to preach the Gospel for the salvation of souls.

“Then let us go forth in the name of God,” was his unhesitating answer, and he accepted the decision as final.

All the episodes of Francis’ life, all his teaching are intensely relevant to the history of Clare; he and she, San Damiano and the Porziuncula, his companions and the Poor Ladies, cannot be separated. Francis’ influence was paramount in the formation of the Sisters, and “he lived as though he were alone in the world with God,” which Clare too was fast learning to do. Her ideal of an abbess was the same as his of a minister. “Superiors,” in the usual sense, there could never be in a Franciscan family, and Francis’ own wish was to be the servant of all. His words are very clear; “Let no one ask from another more than he is himself ready to give to God”; and to a minister he said, “Let there be no brother in the world who if he has sinned, no matter how grievously, having seen thy face shall not go away without the assurance of thy mercy. And if he seeks not mercy, ask him if he desires it, and if he should appear before thee a thousand times, love him more than me to the end thou mayest draw him to the Lord . . . those who are set over others must never pride themselves on their office more than if they were set to wash their brothers’ feet; woe to any religious who being in a place of authority does not wish to give it up; blessed the superior who in the midst of his subjects comports himself as though they were his masters.”

The fruit borne by Francis’ teaching and example is clear from the beginning of Clare’s religious life. When the lay Sisters returned from their errands Clare always washed their feet herself, and served them in the refectory; and there is another echo of Francis in her injunction that whenever on these errands they happened to see a tree in leaf or flowers, always they were to praise God for His creatures.

When the begging Brothers brought back whole loaves she would only exclaim that the offerings were too generous, “and she did this because she preferred to receive the alms of broken loaves rather than whole ones.”

From the first Clare was as unremittingly harsh to herself as Francis. Celano describes her habit as consisting of one tunic of cheap, common, harsh cloth with a very common cloak giving little warmth, an equally common black veil and bare feet. This in the cold and on the stone floors of Assisi! She had two hair-shirts on which she rang the changes, one of boar’s hide, the other of knotted horsehair: she slept on vine twigs with a stone as her pillow, perhaps varied by a log: three days a week she ate and drank nothing, and the community kept two Lents in the year which for Clare meant bread and water. Only on Sundays she took a “little wine out of reverence for Holy Communion.” No wonder that Francis and the Bishop went together to San Damiano and ordered her by holy obedience to eat at least one and a half ounces of bread a day; no wonder that after a few years she became a chronic invalid, and had to obey Francis command to sleep on a mattress and a straw-stuffed pillow. There is, however, a great deal to wonder at, that this regime never made her harsh to others: on the contrary the witnesses in the cause of canonization emphasize her great sympathy and compassion, her unfailing gentleness and kindness. It was she who went round to see if anyone were in trouble, who would cover up any sick Sister with warm blankets, who thought of everyone’s physical, as well as spiritual, well-being. Like Francis she was always insistent on the care of the sick – when the sick person was not herself.

Sister Beatrice said of Clare: “Her sanctity was in her chastity, her humility, her patience and kindness. When she issued an order, it was with great humility and fear, and often she hastened to do herself what she commanded to

others; she made herself the last of all." Here we have Francis' ideal personified; and in her own later rule, Clare enjoins it on every abbess of a community of Poor Ladies. She learnt the lessons of Francis from putting them into practice through forty-two years.

By 1215 the Poor Ladies were recognized as a religious community; and that year saw Francis in Rome for the Fourth Lateran Council. The Pope approved the new orders of Friars, and made a stirring appeal for reform, for a new life in Christ of every believer, and for the Crusade. He quoted the pitiful and heroic venture of the Children's Crusade, which indeed was bound to touch all hearts and bring shame on many.

One result of Innocent's appeal was Francis' "Letter to All Christians," burning with longing to reach the unknown multitudes, imploring them, mostly in the words of the Gospel, to love God and to follow Christ, to learn to know the sweetness of the Lord, and to love light, and not darkness.

He knew that God was not asking everyone to leave their homes and follow him like the First Companions and Clare; yet multitudes of those not called to the fullness of poverty still in Giles' words "wanted to be with him for love of Christ," and these Francis would not turn away. From them he demanded absolutely a right and unselfish use of all God's gifts, free from exploitation, and he called every Christian to a new sense of responsibility, a new respect for the values of justice and charity.

It was a glorious opening out, enabling those living in the world under his motto of Pax et Bonum to share in the life of their elder brothers the Friars, and their Sisters the Poor Ladies. Among the first to join this outer circle of followers was the rich Roman lady Jacopa dei Settesoli who became

such a friend to the Fraternity that Francis nicknamed her "Brother Jacopa." She carried out his ideal of life in the world as thoroughly as Clare did in the cloister; the two must have known each other well. Thus arose the Order of Penance later known as the Third Order of Saint Francis: the crumbs of humanity were always precious to Francis as well as the loaves.

There is no better symbol of the union of the First, Second, and Third Orders than the badge of the Fraternity in which the arm of Christ is crossed with that of Francis. It is the emblem of the fullest, most intimate union of the crucified Christ with the Christian, and therefore of the union in Christ of all who wish to follow Him.

Clare, of course, knew of this widening out of the Franciscan family; and first by prayer, and also in other ways she must have contributed to its increase. Her fame had naturally spread beyond Assisi, and Celano tells how women came to her from all sides: and "because of her example the unmarried determined to preserve their virginity, the married to live more chastely, those who are noble and illustrious learned to despise grand palaces and build humble monasteries wherein they consider it a great honour and glory to live for love of Christ. Many living in the married state separate by mutual consent, the men betaking themselves to hermitages, the women to monasteries. Mothers encourage their daughters, and daughters their mothers, sisters each other in the service of Christ, aunts do likewise with their nieces. On hearing the fame of Clare, many single women who could not take up life in the cloister according to an order and rule, lived religiously in their family homes. Clare's example and virtue brought her so many spiritual children that indeed the words of the prophet seemed fulfilled in her, that many are the children of the desolate, more than of her that hath a husband." The Third

Franciscan Order has a tremendous debt towards the Second.

Innocent III died in Perugia in the June of 1216, and soon afterwards while praying in the chapel of the Porziuncula Francis received a command from Christ to go and ask the Pope for a plenary indulgence for all who should visit the Porziuncula with contrite hearts. He set out at once for Perugia with Masseo and presented his petition to the newly elected Pope Honorius III. When asked how many years of indulgence he wished for, he answered; "Holy Father, I do not want years but souls." Honorius demurred, pointing out that it was not customary for the Church to grant such favours, but Francis replied, "What I ask is not from myself, but from Jesus Christ who sent me." He conquered the new Pope as he had done Innocent, "My son, it is my will that you have what you seek"; and when the cardinals objected that this was folly and would prejudice the Crusade indulgence, he still would not alter his decision.

Francis had wanted the indulgence for every day in the year, but the Pope restricted it to two days: as Francis left the room, he called him back. Was he so simple that he did not want a sealed official ratification of his privilege? "Holy Father, your word is sufficient for me. If this is the work of God, it is for Him to manifest His will. I desire no document, but the Blessed Virgin shall be the charter, Christ the Notary, and the Angels the witnesses." The Porziuncula indulgence has always rested on the Popes verbal assurance as Francis wished that it should.

The Porziuncula chapel of Our Lady of the Angels was consecrated on August 2 by seven bishops: they wished Francis to preach, and he began "I want to send you all to Heaven . . . all of you who have come here today, all who

shall come on this day each year with a contrite heart shall have an indulgence for all their sins.”

This was another reaching out to the multitudes whom Francis would never see, and whose salvation mattered to him so much; another great light kindled in the Porziuncula, another proof of the mothering presence of our Lady. Francis loved her as a child, a lover, a knight; her name was continually on his lips, her presence always with him, and he turned to her with every tender word and song that came into his head. He was so sure that she, who never failed God in loving, could not fail the children given her by Christ, mothering every virtue, every tiny impulse of love, protecting, sheltering, guiding, for God has put all graces into her hands. “When I say Hail Mary the heavens bow down, angels rejoice, Hell trembles, and the devils flee away,” Francis was fond of declaring, and he amplified his words saying: “As wax melts in the fire and dust flies before the wind, so at the invocation of the name of Mary the whole host of evil spirits is dispersed ... in danger, anguish, difficulty, call on Mary, think on Mary, let her not out of your heart or mouth.”

He wished all chapels of the Fraternity to be dedicated first of all to our Lady, and at the centre of all these chapels and churches stands the Porziuncula of Our Lady of the Angels.

Did Clare ever go down to the Porziuncula after the granting of the indulgence? It was a tremendous event in the lives of all Francis’ followers, especially in Clare’s: and as the stricter enclosure was only given to San Damiano some three years later, there was no particular reason why she should not, especially considering her own strong spiritual ties with Saint Mary of the Angels. Certainly one direct result of the consecration of the Porziuncula and the granting of the indulgence was that an upstairs oratory in San Damiano was

also solemnly consecrated to our Lady, and the monastery was henceforth known as Our Lady of Saint Damian's (Sanctae Mariae de Sancto Damiano). Like Francis, Clare wished that her name should always come first in the dedication of every convent and church of the Second Order, and this became a general custom. The consecration of the oratory in San Damiano was performed on the eve of Saint Laurence by the same seven bishops who had officiated at the Porziuncula, and a special indulgence was attached to it; all this was done at Clare's particular wish, and the chapel was held in great honour by the Assisians.

We catch a glimpse of San Damiano about this time in the writings of Bishop Jacques de Vitry who was at Perugia when Innocent died. He was scandalized by much that he saw; and all the more ready to notice the doings of Francis and the new movement with interest and approval. After commenting on the friars he adds: "The women live in communities in hospices at the gate of the city; they depend for their livelihood on the work of their hands for which they receive no remuneration. They only complain of one thing, that they receive too much honour from the populace."

This is a valuable testimony because it throws light on the relation between the Poor Ladies and the citizens of Assisi. Clare shared Francis' idea of work, and he hated idleness as much as he did money. "I worked with my hands," he said later, and always wished his followers to do likewise. Clare, too, was a worker, but neither she nor her Sisters wanted pay; when they had no food the friars begged for them, and obviously the French Bishop saw no sign of grievance among those who contributed to the upkeep of the monastery. They knew that the title "Poor Ladies" was genuine, and already the Sisters were respected and loved.

Not long after all this, another very important moment came in Francis' and Clare's lives when he met Cardinal Ugolino, bishop of Ostia, who soon became the protector of the whole Fraternity. The friendship between these three is very touching: the Cardinal was nearing seventy and Francis and Clare were more than forty years younger. From the first moment Ugolino had been powerfully attracted to Francis in whom he saw personified many of his own ideals; and besides being a great churchman, he was also a very humble man, and a man of vision with a young heart. He believed that Francis and Clare had really heard the voice of Christ, and he wanted to help them in the practical realisation of a vocation whose difficulties and dangers he well understood.

When Francis stayed in the Cardinal's house in Rome he took Lady Poverty with him, for there as everywhere he insisted on going out to beg, and distributed the bits of bread he received among the other guests. It is easy to imagine the faces and voices. For a moment Ugolino recoiled; "Brother, why have you gone out begging thereby slighting my house which is also yours and that of your brothers?"

"But I have honoured it through paying homage to our great Lord, for God is pleased through poverty and voluntary alms. And for me it is a royal dignity to follow the God who being so rich, for love of us became poor. I find greater delight in a poor table spread only with small alms than in a banquet of countless courses."

Francis' speech gave no offence; the Cardinal turned to him: "My son, do whatever seems good to thee because the Lord is with thee." The understanding of a friend could go no further.

His affection for Clare is shown in the following letter:

To his beloved Mother and Sister in Christ, the Lady Clare, handmaid of Christ, Ugolino, Bishop of Ostia, a miserable man and a sinner commends his whole being, his present and future state. Dearest Sister in Christ,

When the necessity of returning home separated me from your holy conversation and tore me away from the joy of those heavenly treasures, such bitterness of heart overcame me, such cruel pangs and floods of tears, that unless I had found at the feet of Jesus His wonted pity, I think my spirit would have failed me and my soul melted away. When I celebrated Easter with you and with the other handmaids of Christ, and we talked together of Christ's most holy Body, truly I was wrapt in a glorious ecstasy of gladness; and as Our Lord's disciples were filled with immense sorrow when He was taken from them and nailed to the cross, so I am now desolate because deprived of your presence.

I have always felt myself to be a poor sinful man, but now that I know your pre-eminent merits, and have seen with my own eyes the austerity of your life, now I say, I know for certain that I am not in a fit state to die. I am so weighed down by the burden of guilt, and have so grievously offended the Lord of the whole earth, that I can never hope to be gathered into the company of the elect unless you obtain the forgiveness of my sin by your prayers and tears. Therefore to you I commit my soul, to you I commend my spirit, and if you have not been solicitous for my salvation, you will have to answer for me in the day of judgment. Your earnest devotion, your many tears can certainly obtain whatever you ask from the Supreme Judge of us all.

The Lord Pope is not going to Assisi at present, but I long to see you and your sisters, and somehow or other I shall

contrive to visit you.

Salute the virgin Agnes for me, and my sister and all your sisters in Jesus Christ. Farewell.

Rome.

The lack of a date makes it impossible to know exactly when this was written, but the mention of Agnes implies that she was still at San Damiano. She left a few years later for Florence.

Ugolino's affection and enthusiasm did not blind him to the fact that a time of great difficulty was fast approaching; and to his lot fell the ungrateful task of directing the organisation of a divine inspiration which had come into being, as free as air on the wings of love, but which – the world being what it is – could not remain so. The first "Rule" which had amply sufficed for twelve like-minded men was inadequate for twelve thousand or even twelve hundred, since numbers change circumstances.

It was also clear that the first simple Rule of the Poor Ladies would have to be revised, for one reason because the Lateran Council had decreed that any new community must follow one of the existing rules.

Ugolino must certainly have discussed the whole matter with Francis, but the latter was in Syria when the Cardinal drafted the new Rule for San Damiano. He based it on that of the Benedictines: ascetically it was harsh, which would have been no drawback to Clare, and dispensation could always be obtained for those who found the penitential clauses too hard. What mattered so vitally to her was the omission of any mention of "sublime poverty." On this subject obviously Ugolino meant to gain time: his able, legal mind believed in the virtue of prudence; he may have wanted to leave the

Sisters as free as possible, and he declared that the only object of his Rule was “to enable them to fulfill their divine vocation.” Clare thought otherwise since, for her, complete poverty was the corner-stone of the whole building. She may have been slightly comforted when he obtained a privilege of exemption from episcopal control for San Damiano, for this reinforced the bond between the Poor Ladies and the friars, especially as the exemption held good only so long as the Sisters remained without possessions. He also obtained from the Holy See the recognition of the Poor Ladies as the Second Franciscan Order, with the right to own nothing except their house and chapel; and from Clare’s point of view, although this was insufficient, it was still a gain.

This must have been an extremely hard period for Clare: the Sisters probably heard the current rumour that Francis had died in the East; they certainly knew of the confusion and distress among the Brothers which were largely due to the mistakes of Brothers Matthew and Gregory who had been appointed as Francis’ vicars during his absence with the charge that they should “console the Brothers.” In this they failed; some of Francis close friends took refuge in the hermitages; other Brothers wandered about at their own sweet will, and one of them collected a following of male and female lepers who wished to be included in the Fraternity. Clare’s duty must have appeared perfectly definite: in the midst of all this trouble she would have wished to stand unflinchingly for Francis’ primitive ideal.

Cardinal Ugolino’s Rule imposed the enclosure on San Damiano, but several episodes told by Celano suggest a far less rigid clausum than that which was later established by Boniface VIII. Apparently the sick were admitted to see Clare, and when she lay dying “a great crowd of secular folk” were also allowed in which would certainly have been impossible later. Francis’ ideal for himself and his Brothers

was to serve and help all; surely Clare and her Sisters followed his example as far as it was practicable. Clare was obviously in touch with some people living in the world, for Messire Ugolino in giving evidence for the cause of her canonization told how Clare had sent to tell him that God willed his reconciliation with his wife whom he had not seen for twenty-two years. He obeyed out of respect for Clare.

Ugolino took San Damiano under his own jurisdiction, and appointed as “visitor” first a Cistercian, and then Francis’ early companion Brother Philip, whom Celano describes as a man “whose tongue the Lord had touched with the pebble of purity so that he spoke sweet words concerning Him, and though he was not learned he could understand and interpret the sacred Scriptures.” One day while Brother Philip was preaching, Clare was marvellously consoled during the greater part of the sermon by the vision of “a most beautiful Child,” and Celano adds: “she who was deemed worthy to behold this thing concerning her Mother, was filled with ineffable sweetness.”

With excessive zeal Brother Philip obtained letters from the Holy See enabling him if necessary to defend the Poor Ladies, by excommunicating anyone who troubled them. This too was quite alien to Francis, and on his return from Syria he appealed to the Cardinal to have the letters cancelled.

What boundless joy and relief there must have been at San Damiano when it became known that he was back, and though ill, more himself than ever! That day nothing else can have mattered!

It was never claimed that Francis approved Ugolino’s Constitutions, as his Rule for the Sisters was called; only that he sanctioned it. Clare accepted it “with great sorrow” for it

was a clear move away from the first inspiration; nevertheless she and her Sisters observed it for nearly thirty years, but during this time she never ceased to press for a ratification of the “Privilege of sublime Poverty” granted by Innocent III.

After his return, Francis took over the guidance of San Damiano; and surely he told Clare and the Sisters of the Holy Places, carrying them into the depths of his own experience, and firing them with his own missionary spirit and longing for martyrdom, a longing always shared by Clare. When Francis heard that five of his Brothers had been martyred in Morocco he exclaimed, “Now I have five real brothers”; and incidentally their deaths brought the young Portuguese, the future Saint Anthony of Padua, into the Fraternity. Through him and the friars in Spain Francis and Clare surely heard how our Lady had revealed to Peter Nolasco and Raymond of Penafort her wish for an order dedicated to ransoming Christian slaves from the Moors. What could have appealed more to Francis than the idea of converting the Moors through such an act of Christian charity as that of taking a brothers place at the oars of a Moorish galley?

The second mission to Germany too was gaining many followers, and had opened the Franciscan ideals to Elizabeth of Hungary, the first princess to love poverty as Francis and Clare did. She put on the spirit of Francis long before he sent her his old cloak which she used to wear when praying. The fame of her holiness must early have reached San Damiano, for Elizabeth had one of those hearts which radiate charity.

Already Francis’ followers were carrying their message far and wide: the cry was for missions, missions, and the response came in increasing waves. Here was the answer to his obedience to the call which had come to him in Spoleto

and San Damiano; he was being given the whole world as his field. The Franciscan eagerness for missions is more important than any of the dissensions in the Order; and it was being emphasized while Francis was entering the darkest period of his life. His enormous success had inevitably brought new problems, and he realized that a formal spirit, entirely alien to his own, was creeping into the Fraternity. He was harassed by demands which were contrary to all he stood for; discord and discontent among the Brothers made the chapters increasingly difficult.

At San Damiano, however, there was no jarring note: Clare was as disappointed with Ugolino's Rule for the Sisters as Francis was when the Holy See insisted that the missionary Brothers must carry credentials to protect them from being mistaken for heretics. It was a necessary precaution but not Francis' ideal, for he wished the Brothers to set out armed only with the cross and the Gospel: 'For myself I wish only this privilege that I may never have any privilege from man save only that I may reverence all and convert mankind through my obedience to our holy rule more by example than by word.'

Clare's example was also active: Celano insists upon this point and says how the little spring of heavenly grace which had sprung up in the valley of Spoleto was not allowed to exhaust itself within such narrow limits, but was transformed by divine Providence into a great river. "The news of these things was spread abroad and began to gain many souls for Christ. Although Clare lived enclosed the fame of her virtues caused her name to shine splendidly in all the world. It became known to illustrious ladies; and duchesses and queens talked of her in their palaces. The highest nobility bowed in admiration before her example, and pride was converted into humility. Many ladies worthy to become the wives of the greatest princes, when they heard of Clare,

chose the narrow way of penance. Many cities, hills, and plains are adorned with monasteries built with the spiritual stones of Clares example: and the pattern of her life has increased the cult of chastity also among those who live in the world.”

New communities wishing to follow the Rule of San Damiano were constantly springing up. There were Poor Ladies already in Spello, San Severino, Perugia, and Siena, and in 1221 the Benedictines of Monticelli near Florence asked to be transformed into a house with the San Damiano Rule. In this they were encouraged by Cardinal Ugolino, and Monticelli was one of the four convents immune from episcopal control. It was settled that a Poor Lady from San Damiano should go and help these new Sisters in learning the way of poverty, and the choice fell on Clares Sister Agnes. One of her letters to Clare has survived, evidently written soon after her arrival:

To her venerable Mother and Mistress in the Lord, to her dearly loved Lady Clare and to all her community from Agnes, the humble servant of God, who kneels at her feet.

No created thing is stable; the most splendid lot may suddenly be turned into misery. O Mother, this has happened to me, and it is an intense tribulation. I am suffering more than I can say by being separated from you and my sisters when I hoped to live and die beside you. I can see no end to this misery, only an increasingly dark cloud, a night with no dawn, an unavoidable storm.

We seemed united by so many bonds, by blood, faith, by our vows, and I imagined we were inseparable in life and death, and that one grave would receive us. Alas it was all an illusion, and my heart is filled with sadness!

Dear Sister, have compassion on me, and cry with me, and pray to Our Lord to save you from such torment; you will not find greater unhappiness than mine. I am oppressed with grief, consumed by fire, and I languish without any rest. I am in the midst of a sea of bitterness; O help me, and with your prayers obtain for me the strength to carry this heavy cross.

What can I say or do, Mother, now that I have lost all hope of seeing you and my sisters again in this world? O if I could only tell you all that is in my heart; if only these pages which are wet with tears could tell you all I suffered and suffer! My skin is parched and I am dying of despair at the thought of not seeing you and those I love again: no one can console me.

As compensation for all this, you will rejoice with me concerning the mission you entrusted to me. From the first moment all the nuns of Monticelli welcomed me tenderly with unanimous respect and joy. There was not one discordant note. They all promised to obey and be subject to me, and all unite with me in begging your prayers and those of your community, and implore you to consider them as your most docile daughters, always anxious to obey your orders, and to follow your advice. I must tell you that as regards Poverty, the Lord Pope has consented to my wishes which are yours.

Please remind Brother Elias that he is in duty bound to come often, very often, and see and comfort us. Farewell.

Poor Agnes, and poor Clare! In choir, in the refectory, everywhere each must have seen an empty place! Clares answer to this letter is lost, and she also sent Agnes various objects, among them her own veil which remained a precious relic for Monticelli. Agnes stayed there for thirty years, content with her lot since it was the wish of Clare, but

always homesick for San Damiano. She is also said to have visited the houses of Poor Ladies in Venice and Perugia; she may even have gone to other places and in the end she was called home to San Damiano before her sisters death.

Round Francis the difficulties were thickening; and Clare was involved in everything that happened to him. He had once warned his Brothers that their early days together were easy: "It is like eating apples, sweet and pleasant to the taste; a little later the apples will not be so sweet and pleasant, and in the end some will be so bitter that we shall not be able to eat them, even though outwardly they will look fair and juicy." The bitter fruit came when he saw Lady Poverty being betrayed by her own knights. Clare surely knew how, at the Porziuncula, he was seen standing alone behind the apse with raised arms in great distress imploring mercy on his Fraternity.

In the spring of 1223 he went one day to San Damiano, and as always there must have been a flutter through the house at his coming. He spoke to no one but went straight to the chapel and stood there for some time silent, with uplifted arms while the Sisters waited for a word or sign. At last he turned and asked for ashes, and when they were brought he sprinkled them on his own head and all round him. Then he intoned the Miserere, after which he left hastily and in silence.

He was already an ill man, yet fighting for Poverty every step of the way, and those who begged of him to modify his ideas could not see that, to him, change was impossible. The chapter of 1223 was held in an atmosphere of bitter tension – and yet all the Brothers loved him! Could – can – vision such as Francis' be "organized" on a large scale without being tarnished? "Would there were fewer Friars Minor" he exclaimed, "would that seeing them, the world should

wonder at their fewness." At last when pressed for new alterations he answered, "Do as you wish, but my permission shall never be a snare to my brothers." His protest was to live the rule, simple, and subject to all.

A new phase was opening in Francis' life to which there is a clue in the words which Celano says were spoken to him by Christ: "O little Poor Man, why are you distressed? Have I set you over My religion and you do not know that I am its chief Protector? I set you, a simple man, over it to the end that those who will may follow you in those things I work in you as an example to others."

He went to the hermitage of Fonte Colombo to rewrite the Rule, still pestered by dissident Brothers who complained to Brother Elias: "We are afraid it will be too hard for us to follow. For he is very strict with himself and might easily command what we cannot observe." He described his ideal for the Friar Minor saying: "The perfect Friar Minor must be as true to Poverty as Bernard, simple and pure as Leo, chaste as Angelo, intelligent and eloquent as Masseo, contemplative as Giles, a man of prayer like Rufino whose mind is with God whether he sleeps or wakes, patient as Juniper, strong as John, loving as Roger, detached like Lucidus who when he found he was beginning to like a place would leave it saying, 'Our home is in Heaven.'"

Francis might have added "as faithful as Clare." Already he was sometimes anxious over the future of San Damiano; could Clare persist in the way of complete poverty? A popular legend tells that Francis and Leo were returning from Siena where they had been harshly received. Francis was discouraged thinking of Clare's sufferings in the fight for poverty: would her spiritual and bodily strength be equal to the strain? He was resting by a well and looked down; after a

time he raised his eyes smiling. "Brother Leo, what do you think I have seen here?"

"The moon, Father, which is reflected in the water."

"No, Brother Leo, not our sister Moon, but by the grace of God I have seen the true face of Sister Clare, and it is so pure and shining that all my doubts have vanished."

Finally the Rule which has led thousands to the heights of sanctity was approved by Honorius III in the autumn of 1223, and from Rome Francis went to spend Christmas at the hermitage of Greccio. It had always been the "feast of feasts" for him, the day when Heaven and earth are united, and he wished not only for every poor person to be entertained by someone richer, but that even the walls should be polished with oil, every ox and ass have double rations, and corn be scattered for the birds. In the tiny chapel a crib was prepared according to Francis' wish, and Celano says that "Greccio was transformed almost into a second Bethlehem and that wonderful night seemed like fullest day to both man and beast for the joy at the renewing of the mystery." Francis composed a beautiful canticle for the feast, and probably sang it in the woods of Greccio as well as in the chapel, for Celano says that at such times "he would invite all the elements to the praise of Jesus. The last verse runs: "Bring to the Lord glory unto His name: bring your own bodies and bear His holy cross, and follow His most holy precepts unto the end."

The Passion was present even in those Christmas praises, though Francis cannot have known how prophetic his words were, and that within the next few months his own body would be sealed with the marks of the cross so that men would dare to refer to him as "alter Christus."

Probably during that Lent he composed the Office of the Passion which shows clearly how he must almost have known the whole Psalter by heart, and gives us an idea of how intensely he lived in the Liturgy. Clare loved this Office and constantly recited it for she lived in the Passion as he did, not as in some far-away event, but as in a reality that is always happening, and in which she was actively participating. The cross was completely the living centre of their lives: while Francis was still restoring the Porziuncula, a passer-by came on him wandering round it crying, and when asked what was his trouble he answered: "I am weeping over the sufferings of my Lord Jesus Christ, and I will not be ashamed to wander round the whole world and weep for them." The stranger was so moved that they wept together.

The sight of a crucifix sent him into a transport of love and compassion: "Then he would sing so full was his soul of melody. He would begin softly, and then the song would become louder, and French words would pour from his lips as though he were rendering into words other sounds which his ears heard. He would pick up two bits of wood, and sing songs of love to Christ His crucified love, until love so overcame him that he broke into piteous sobs and lamentations, and forgetting his make-believe viol, he would fling himself on the ground in an ecstasy."

What to us is dim, to Francis was clear. Like children begging for safety we pray "within Thy wounds hide us," but Francis knew that in those wounds is hidden our own share of the evil that made the cross a necessity. His love was sufficiently strong to penetrate our Lords agony of soul and body, and to know the horror of the death through sin of souls created for God. Long and bitterly Francis wept that "Love is not loved," and his one desire was "to die for love of Thy love Who, for love of my love, hast not refused to die."

His two early visions of Christ crucified coloured all his life. Of the first Saint Bonaventure wrote: "One day there appeared to him Jesus Christ the Crucified, and at this sight his soul was so filled with love, and the memory of Christ's Passion was so impressed on his heart that henceforth he could not think of Christ and the cross without breaking into tears and sighs." Of the second in San Damiano, Celano tells, "From that hour he was so penetrated with compassion for the Crucified that ever afterwards he carried in his heart those stigmata which later were to appear in the wounds on his own body."

What must it have been to hear Francis speak of the Passion in San Damiano with that same crucifix hanging above his head? He would have transported any audience; how much more Clare and her Sisters! No wonder they knew the Office of the Passion by heart; each time they raised their eyes to that painted cross the flame of love from the soul of Francis must have leaped in theirs. This tremendous love of Christ crucified was the impulse behind all Clare's penance.

When in the August of 1224 news came that Francis with Leo and several other Brothers had gone to La Verna, had she a premonition that he would come back changed? The wonderful story of those weeks was surely told her by Leo: he must have described the extraordinary fissures and chasms of the rocks, and how it had been revealed to Francis that they had been thus rent at the hour of the Crucifixion; and she, who knew how he always needed animal friends would have heard gladly of the falcon that watched over him. Leo certainly repeated Francis' words about the Fraternity, "Lord, I commit to Thee the family Thou hast given me, I cannot lead them any longer"; and how he had prayed, "Permit me to experience in my soul and body the sufferings of Thy Passion, permit to feel in my heart Thy love for mankind." Every detail of the anguish of Francis and of

the divine consolations that came to him was precious to Clare: "I did not see the final vision," Leo must have told her, "but when he asked us whether or no it was right for him to speak of the secrets of God, Illuminato reminded him, Brother, thou knowest that the heavenly secrets are not revealed to thee only for thyself." And then, in Francis' own words Leo could describe the coming of the seraph, and how through an inner Same he had been entirely transformed into the likeness of Christ crucified, with the marks of Christ's wounds upon his own body.

Leo may have added how Francis had bidden Rufino to consecrate the stone on which the seraph had stood, and how that night the light over La Verna was so bright that some muleteers got up and saddled their animals thinking the time had come to go on their way into Romagna. And surely he produced the parchment on which he had noted the song composed by Francis at La Verna:

Thou art the holy God, the God of gods who alone workest marvels.

Thou art strong, Thou art great, Thou art most high.

Thou art almighty, the holy Father, King of Heaven and earth.

Thou art threefold and one, the Lord God of gods.

Thou art good, every good, the highest good, the Lord God living and true.

Thou art Love, Charity, Thou art Wisdom, Thou art Humility.

Thou art Patience, Thou art Fortitude and Prudence.

Thou art Security, Thou art Rest, Thou art Joy and Gladness.

Thou art Justice and Temperance, Thou art all our Wealth and Plenty.

Thou art our Refuge and Strength, Thou art our Faith, Hope and Charity.

Thou art our great Sweetness, Thou art our eternal Life,

Infinite Goodness, great and wonderful Lord God almighty,
Loving and merciful Saviour.

Then he must have turned the parchment over so that Clare could read the blessing that Francis had written with his own hand for "Brother little Sheep of God." Kissing it, he put it back into his habit, "I shall always wear it."

Leo would also have told of Francis farewell to La Verna, and of the journey back to Santa Maria degli Angeli, and how everywhere people had run to meet him waving olive branches and crying, "Here is the saint," and bringing the sick to be healed by his touch. But he, who had always been responsive, was now often so absorbed in prayer that he did not even notice either people or places. As they neared home it had seemed to Leo that a cross of light with the figure of Christ went before them.

Francis was now always in pain, almost blind, unable to walk, but he wished to start off on another missionary journey. However, Cardinal Ugolino insisted that he should go to Rieti to consult a specialist about his eyes.

He paused at San Damiano, and Clare had a hut put up for him in the garden; probably she never knew it was overrun with mice. One night he was so suffering that he prayed his courage and patience might not fail, and a voice answered: "Tell me, Brother, if in return for thy sufferings and infirmities thou shouldst be offered a treasure so vast and precious that the whole world by comparison would be as nothing to it, wouldst thou not greatly rejoice?"

"Great indeed, O Lord, would be this treasure, and very precious, and exceedingly wonderful and desirable."

"Then, Brother, be glad and make merry in thy infirmities and sufferings, and for the rest be assured of My Kingdom as

though thou wert already there.”

The next day Francis was so exultant that the Canticle of the Sun burst from him as leaves burst from a tree at the touch of spring.

All-highest, omnipotent good Lord,
To Thee all praises, glory honour
And every benediction.
To Thee all-Highest they are due,
And no man living
Is worthy to speak of Thee.

Praised be Thou, my Lord, with all Thy creatures,
Especially for our Master Brother Sun
Who is our day; through him Thou shinest on us.
And he is glorious and radiant
In his great splendour,
Thee, All-Highest, he reveals.
Praised be Thou, my Lord, for Mistress Moon and for the stars
In Heaven Thou hast formed them, shining,
And precious and fair.

Praised be Thou, my Lord, for Brother Wind
For the air, for clouds, for sunshine and all weathers,
Through which Thou givest food to all Thy creatures.
Praised be Thou, my Lord, for Sister Water
For she is very humble and useful
And precious and pure.

Praised be Thou, my Lord, for Brother Fire
By whom Thou enlightenest our darkness,
And he is beauteous and merry, boisterous and strong.

Praised be Thou, my Lord, for our sister Mother Earth,
Who sustains and nourishes us all,

And brings forth divers fruits and many coloured grass and flowers.

God makes the stars “chiarite e belle” so Chiara’s name is also in the Canticle, she, who to so many was a shining star.

This is Francis’ grace for all creatures, for life itself. He saw the beauty of every single thing, then he paused, as an artist may before adding the final touch. How should he sing of man? To sing of him in his separation from God and his fellows would be a discordant note; Francis needed to sing of man in his wholeness of whom it could be said, he lives now, not himself, but Christ lives in him.

While he was waiting for that inspiration, word reached San Damiano that a new feud had broken out between the Bishop and the Podesta of Assisi. The Bishop had excommunicated his enemy who retaliated by forbidding the citizens to sell anything to the Bishop or to have any communication with him. Francis was deeply perturbed: “This is a great disgrace for us servants of God that the Bishop and Podesta should be in such enmity and that no one should try and reconcile them.” He sent two friars to the City Fathers requesting them to go to the Bishops house; they consented, probably expecting Francis to step in and arbitrate. He did not go, he would not set himself up as the judge between men, the only solution he would offer was that of charity. In his stead there was a group of friars led by Brother Pacifico, the poet and musician, who had composed the melody for the Canticle. Francis’ message was the Canticle which they sang with a new verse he had added for the occasion:

Blessed be Thou, my Lord, for those who forgive for love of Thee,
And bear infirmity and tribulation,

Blessed are they who abide in peace
For by Thee they shall be crowned.

“I have confidence in God that He will touch their hearts and bring them back into charity and peace.” When the antagonists heard the blessing on peace they may have smiled; Francis had repeated such words so often, yet they knew that even among his own followers there was discord. That day, however, the words went home. Francis’ confidence was justified, for when the song ended there were tears in the eyes of the listeners, the Podesta advanced, and his answer broke the silence: “I declare in truth that not only do I ask pardon of the Bishop whom I hold to be my Lord, but I would forgive him had he killed my son or brother. For the love of God and of His servant Francis I am ready to make any reparation he may ask.” He was kneeling before the Bishop who raised him with the words: “It were fitting to my office that I should be humble; but since by nature I am irascible, you must treat me indulgently.”

What rejoicing there must have been at San Damiano!

Before Francis left, Clare made special shoes for him since he could no longer go barefoot or with ordinary sandals. Those shoes still exist; they are of soft kid, and an ingenious padding in the sole kept the wounds in his feet off the ground. Those weeks of his presence were the most precious gift he could have given Clare and the Sisters, for in his presence they found the essence of all he had taught them. Francis, marked with the stigmata, had become more than ever the “charioteer” of every soul; he had opened before all his followers new horizons of love.

Despite his desire for secrecy, the reports of the stigmata spread, and when he left for Rieti the news that filtered back

to San Damiano was of a triumphal progress. Many ill people were healed: perhaps it was during this journey that he cured an ill baby of Bagnorea who would become famous as Saint Bonaventure. Clare must have been most pleased with the account of a leper who “abused the brothers till none could bear to listen to him.”

But Saint Francis approached this abandoned leper and greeted him,

“God give thee peace dear Brother.”

“What peace can I have when God has taken everything from me, and has made me all decayed and malodorous? Besides I would not complain of my disease, but the brothers whom thou hast set to wait upon me do not look after me as they should.”

“Son,” answered Francis, “since thou art not content with the others shall I care for thee?”

“I should like that, but what couldst thou do more than they?”

“I will do all thou wishest”

“Then I want thee to wash me all over, for the stench is such that I cannot stand it.”

Thereupon Saint Francis prepared warm water with many aromatic herbs, he undressed the sick man, and began to wash him with his own hands, helped by another brother. And by a miracle of God, wherever Saint Francis touched the sufferer with his blessed hands the leprosy disappeared and the flesh was entirely restored. And as the flesh was healed, so too the soul was restored; for when the leper saw he was well, he was overcome with great sorrow for his sins and

began to weep bitterly. . . . But Saint Francis thanked God for so great a miracle and went away because, from humility, he wished to flee from honour, and sought in all things only God's honour and glory and not his own.

All through that journey Francis gave wonderful last lessons of what it meant to be his follower. The stigmata had in no way lessened his humanity, and this in itself was a lesson: he was eager to help all.

At La Foresta the priest who was his host ruefully saw his vineyard stripped by the crowds who had come to meet Francis. "Do not worry," Francis said, "we cannot do anything about it now, but let us have confidence in God who can make good this loss you have suffered for me." The stripped vineyard gave greater yield that autumn than it had ever done before.

At Rieti he was ready to undergo any treatment Brother Elias, the Minister General, wished. While the iron was being heated for the cauterisation of his temples he seems to have been afraid of flinching. "O Brother Fire," he cried, "among all creatures most noble and useful, be courteous to me in this hour, for I have ever loved thee, and will love for love of Him Who made thee." He put all that he taught into action. He said he felt nothing during the operation; it proved useless, but increasing blindness did not prevent him from singing. He composed songs to send to Clare, and spoke much of the service of the lepers exclaiming, "My Brothers let us begin to serve God for hitherto we have done nothing or hardly anything."

One day when he was suffering more than usual he asked a Brother to play the viol, "to bring comfort to Brother Body who is so full of pain." The punctilious Brother demurred fearing this apparent frivolity.

“Then we will let the thought go,” replied Francis, “one must give up much to avoid irritating one’s weaker brothers.” In the night as he lay awake, the air was suddenly filled with music, and the next morning he said, “I was not allowed to hear the music of men, but I have heard other and far sweeter.”

All this must have come to the ears of the Poor Ladies, and how the Rieti doctors had given Francis plenty of good advice pointing out that though he had always impressed on others the need of considering their body, his own practice had been very different. “Has not thy body been a good and willing servant and ally all thy life? How hast thou treated it in return?” And Francis, perhaps a little conscience-stricken, apologized to Brother Ass, “Rejoice, Brother Body, and forgive me; now I am ready to humour you in every wish.”

The next news that came of him was from Siena where Cardinal Ugolino had sent him to other doctors who were also useless; and then by slow stages he was brought back to Assisi, and lodged with his old friend Bishop Guido, watched over by guards, for his own city was running no risks with what was by that time her greatest treasure. The guards were surprised to hear perpetual singing; and Brother Elias remonstrated with Francis, fearing that people would be shocked at his saint, so near to death, and always wishing for songs. But Francis then was beyond any such consideration; “Leave me, Brother, to rejoice in the Lord and in His praise, and in my infirmities, for by the grace of the Holy Spirit I am so united to my Lord that in His mercy I can well be merry in the most High.”

His wished the doctor, whom he nicknamed “Bembegnato,” to tell him the truth, and when he heard that he would only live a few weeks, he knew the time had come to complete the Canticle of the Sun, and he added two final stanzas:

Praised be Thou, my Lord,
For our sister Death of the Body
From whom no living man can flee.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin,
Blessed are they she finds in Thy most holy will
To whom the second death can do no harm.

All praise and bless and glorify my Lord and thank Him
And serve Him with deep humility.

“Sister Death is to me the gate of life.” To see God as He is, to see Christ, and to follow Him is the perfect fulfillment of life even on this earth. And of Francis it could be said that he held the whole world in his “magnificent heart,” and his heart was in Christ’s, and five words sufficed him, “My God and my All.”

In those weeks he sent messages of comfort to all the friars commending Lady Poverty to their care. He still had strength to dictate His Testament insisting that it was not another “rule,” but “a remembrance, a warning, and an exhortation which I, Little Brother Francis, make for you my blessed Brothers in order that we may observe in a more Catholic way the Rule we have promised to the Lord.”

Francis dying in the midst of his Brothers was the symbol of a unity transcending all divisions. Had he provoked a schism in the Fraternity when points of view were in contrast, that unity would have been irremediably lost. The Testament is his last word; he had abdicated no principle, and he left his Brothers that most eloquent of all testaments and testimonies – himself.

Equally he thought of Clare and her Sisters, and sent them too “sweet words of comfort like a song for their comfort and edification knowing them to be greatly afflicted by his

suffering," Clare, at that moment also gravely ill, may have written, perhaps begging for a visit, but "because he could not visit them in person he sent a letter in which he called them anew to praise the Lord to whom man owes his whole love." He reminded them of their calling, of their vow of poverty and obedience, and of the gratitude they should feel for the alms by which they lived. "Should a Sister ask for something which is denied her, let her suffer this patiently for love of the Lord who lacked so many things in this life, and sought in vain for consolation. Every privation a Sister suffers in this life will be counted to her as a martyrdom; and even should her health suffer, let her forgive the injury with all her heart." He again insisted that Brother Body must be spared if he is to stand the burden of the spiritual life; he exhorted them to inner mortification, to gentleness, compassion, and mutual charity, and with this he sent them all his blessing.

At San Damiano there was only one thought; they could not bear to think they would not see him again. They heard of the move from the Bishop's palace to the Porziuncula and of the blessing to Assisi on the way down. Anyhow, Clare seems to have written and he sent her a last message: "I little Brother Francis desire to follow the life and poverty of our most high Lord Jesus Christ, and of His holy Mother, and to persevere therein until the end. And I beseech you my Ladies, and I counsel you that you live also in this most holy life of poverty. And be greatly careful of yourselves lest by the teaching and counsel of anyone you in any way or at any time draw away from it." He also sent her word: "Go and tell Sister Clare to put aside all sorrow and sadness, for though she cannot see me now, yet before her death she and her Sisters shall see me, and have great comfort through me."

During those days at San Damiano there was much anxiety and little consolation; all hearts were at the Porziuncula. The

news came of Brother Jacopa's arrival, and the Sisters were glad to know of the little comforts she had brought, glad to know she was there. Messengers reported the happenings of each day and Francis' words and blessings to all his followers. "I have done what was mine to do; may Christ teach you what is yours. Divisions and differences of opinion no longer existed; Francis crossed arms and pierced hands were the final seal on the union of his followers, on his and their vocation. Christ in all, and all in Christ.

Perhaps on the evening of October 3 someone at San Damiano, like one of the Brothers, saw a marvellous light over Santa Maria degli Angeli disappear into the sky while the birds were singing; and even before the messenger arrived the Sisters will have known that Sister Death had opened the gate. Francis, poor and humble, enters rich into Heaven."

The crowds that flocked to the Porziuncula saw Francis' body with all trace of suffering gone; awestruck they looked on the wounds of the stigmata, and Celano says that the subsequent vigil was like "a watch of angels."

The funeral procession up to Assisi was one of triumph with songs and waving olive branches and lighted candles. When it reached San Damiano the Brothers paused and "at the grating through which the handmaids of the Lord were wont to receive the sacred Host, the brothers lifted the sacred body from the bier, and held it in their raised arms in front of the window so long as my Lady Clare and the other sisters wished for their comfort."

Of all people she and her Sisters knew the triumph of their Father, yet, "who would not be moved to tears when even the angels of peace wept so bitterly? . . . Never again shall they have speech with him who will not now return to visit

them for his feet are turned into another way! Therefore with sobs and groans and tears they would not be checked in gazing on him and crying, 'O Father why hast thou abandoned us and left us desolate? Couldst thou not have allowed us to go daily before thee to where thou now art? All our joy is gone with thee. Who will comfort us in our poverty of this world's goods, and above all in our poverty of spiritual merits? O poor one among the poor, O lover of poverty, who will help us now in temptation when thou who understood temptation so wisely art no longer here! Who will comfort us in our tribulations? O how bitter is this separation, how dire thy absence, how cruel thy death!'"

According to Bartholomew of Pisa, Clare tried to take one of the "nails" from Francis' hand, but it was impossible, so she measured the body with a strip of linen and later had a picture of Francis painted in the niche where as a youth he had hidden from his father.

Then the procession went on and when it was out of sight Clare and the Sisters could only look towards the church of San Giorgio which had become the shrine for Francis' body.

I cannot but believe that Brother Jacopa went that day to see Clare, and that, left behind as they both were, their union in Francis increased.

After Francis' death the Minister General Elias wrote to all the Provincial Ministers of the Fraternity: The loss is common to us all for our true light was the presence of our Brother and Father Francis who directed our steps into the way of peace. He signed the letter, "Elias, sinner." That was the Elias who loved Francis and whom he loved; whom Clare trusted, and for whose visits Agnes longed.

During Francis' lifetime all his immediate followers had been in a secondary position; with his death they step into the chief places in the foreground. This is especially true of Clare who became increasingly a witness to, and guardian of, his ideal, and the mother of his brothers. For her Francis' ideal was absolute; it was not even his, but Christ's. She had received this from him as the most wonderful of gifts; and she needed the closest possible human imagery to describe how she felt her complete dependence on him, and union with him. In one vision she saw herself fed by him as a child by its mother, and what she took in her mouth seemed to her to be of such pure and shining gold that she saw her own reflection in it as in a mirror. This throws another ray of light on Clare's extreme fortitude and her amazing carry-through of the original inspiration.

All Francis' followers turned for comfort to the Porziuncula and to San Damiano where every stone recalled some incident or word. It is no long flight of imagination to think of Leo telling Clare of La Verna or reading her the Parable of Perfect Joy which Francis had bidden him write down, or confiding to her the gentleness with which Francis had treated Leo's diffidence and what was perhaps a touch of jealousy in his love. It may have been about this time that Leo began the beautiful Missal and Breviary which he wrote for Clare; and he must have told her of the many times he had recited the Divine Office with Francis, often standing in the open, unheeding of wind or rain, or of the Office of Insults which Francis had demanded of him one day when they had no Breviary. "He wished for insults, but only blessings would come out of my mouth." One can almost hear Leo's voice, see Clare's face. Rufino, Bernard, Giles, Angelo, Masseo, and other Brothers must have told her every precious detail of their long intercourse with Francis, and it had become enormously important for all such details to be remembered. She may well have seen and kissed the

cloth, now in the treasure of the Sacro Convento, which Jacopa de' Settesoli had brought to cover his face, and which is said to be her handiwork. In the centre are embroidered the initials A.M.A. which might be read by his friends as expressing his last command. Jacopa would certainly have told her of Francis' visits, of the little human details as well as the spiritual for the two went hand in hand. Jacopa was soon to move permanently to Assisi and Clare would naturally be deeply interested in the increase of the Third Order which meant a spreading of the spirit of Francis.

It seems likely that, about the time of Francis' death, Ortolana joined the community of San Damiano, where she, the great feudal lady, took a vow of obedience to her own daughter. Report says that she had always remained in close touch with Clare whom she often visited, and that Clare assured her: "Mother, if I left thee to embrace the life of religion, I did so to unite myself to thee in a more intimate manner. I assure thee thou wilt have the joy of dying in the arms of thy children." In just about thirty years it must have seemed to Ortolana that the prophecy of Clare's birth had already been fulfilled.

All through that year of 1226 miracles were happening at Francis' tomb, each one a precious sign of his presence to those who loved him. In 1227 Honorius III died, and was succeeded by Cardinal Ugolino as Gregory IX. He at once commissioned Thomas of Celano to write the life of his friend; and when he was driven from Rome through the unrest of the city, he came to Assisi and spent two months with the Bishop, during which time he certainly visited Clare.

In the following year he returned for Francis' canonization, and on that July day friends must have hurried down to San Damiano to tell the Poor Ladies of the triumph of their

Father, and how Gregory, with the tears on his cheeks, had spoken. "He shone in his days as a morning star in the midst of cloud, and as the moon when she is full; and as the sun when it shineth, so did he shine in the temple of God." All over Europe those words were repeated, and never was a *Te Deum* more unanimous. No honour could now be too great for Francis, and his own prophecy in the prison of Perugia was also fulfilled!

It was decided to build a church which would be the final tomb of the saint, a house for its guardians, and a papal palace. Gregory put the whole matter into Elias' capable hands and granted an indulgence to all who contributed to the building. Does this seem far from the spirit of Francis? In one sense, yes; but at the time it seemed not only an expression of universal love and homage, but an inevitable practical necessity for the safe preservation of his body, and there is no hint of disapproval on the part of Clare.

In the incredibly short time of two years the lower part of Elias' church was ready to receive the treasure it had been built to guard. Elias directed the translation of Francis' body in such a way as to outwit the relic hunters but which spoilt the official rejoicings. Everyone including the Pope was furious, and yet, perhaps Elias was right! At any rate the millions who have found peace and inspiration in his church owe some gratitude to its builder. A great painted crucifix by Giunta Pisano used to hang in the nave of the upper church bearing the inscription "*Prater Elias peri fecit. Jesu Christe pie miserere precantis Helie.*"

During Gregory's visit of 1228 there occurred a famous miracle at San Damiano described by Celano and other legends. The Pope accompanied "by many cardinals" had gone to her convent to hear Clare speak of celestial and divine things, and while they discoursed on divine matters

Saint Clare caused the tables to be set with bread that the Holy Father might bless it. When their spiritual discourse was ended, Saint Clare, kneeling before the Pope with great reverence, besought him to bless the bread set on the table. The Holy Father replied, "Clare, thou servant and friend of God, I wish thee to bless it with that sign of the cross to which thou hast dedicated thyself." Then Clare answered: "Holy Father, absolve me from such an act, for surely I should be worthy of harsh correction were I, a most miserable little woman, to dare give such a blessing in the presence of the Vicar of Christ." The Pope, however, continued, "To the end that this may be imputed to the virtue of obedience and not to presumption, I command thee by holy obedience to make the sign of the cross on this bread and to bless it in the name of God." Then Saint Clare being a true daughter of obedience devoutly blessed the loaves with the sign of the most holy cross. O wonder! On each of the loaves there immediately appeared impressed the sign of the cross, most fair to see. Then some of the loaves were eaten, and some, for the sake of the miracle, were set aside. "And when the Holy Father saw the miracle, he partook of the bread and departed leaving Saint Clare his blessing."

It was probably during that visit that Clare begged Gregory to ratify the privilege of poverty accorded by Innocent twelve years before. The Pope pointed out that the times had become more difficult, and he would willingly dispense the Sisters from their vow of poverty. "Holy Father/" answered Clare, "absolve me from my sins, but I shall never wish to be dispensed from following our Lord Jesus Christ."

There was little more to be said, and in a letter to Clare dated September 17, 1228, the Pope made a step in the direction she wished.

Gregory, Servant of the servants of God, to Clare our beloved daughter and to the other sisters of the monastery of San Damiano in the diocese of Assisi, health and apostolic benediction.

It is clear that in absolutely renouncing all earthly property you have had no other motive than to serve God. And now that you have sold your goods and given the proceeds to the poor, you propose to persevere in this complete renunciation in order to follow in the steps of Him, Who being the Way, the Truth and the Life for us became poor. You are boldly walking in His steps, and allowing nothing to turn you aside not even the lack of what is necessary because with the help of grace and the ordering of charity you have subordinated the flesh to the law of the spirit.

On His side, He Who gives the birds their daily food, and clothes the lilies will be your eternal sustenance in the glory of the beatific vision. Therefore, since you have besought Us, by Apostolic favour, We confirm your resolution to live in the utmost poverty, and by the authority of this present letter we confirm to you the privilege that no one can coerce you to receive possessions.

Let no man dare to lacerate this page, or to contradict it. Should anyone have the temerity to do so, let him be warned of the indignation of Almighty God, and of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

Given at Perugia in the second year of Our pontificate.

This was not the only time that Clare got the better of the Pope, who to some extent had to keep a middle course even when sympathizing with her. In 1227 he had warmly commended the Poor Ladies to the care of Giovanni Parenti who had succeeded Elias as Minister General: he wrote:

“Seeing that the order of the Friars Minor is most pleasing to Almighty God, I commit the charge of these women to you and to your successors for ever. Take heed that you bestow on them such solicitude and care as a good shepherd does on the lambs of his flock, and We place you under strict obedience to carry out this command to the letter.”

This was in the true spirit of Francis, and in her own “Rule” Saint Clare records his exact words: “Seeing that by divine inspiration you have become the daughters and handmaids of the Most High, our Heavenly Father, and have espoused yourselves to the Paraclete by choosing to live according to the perfection of the Gospel, I will and hereby I promise on behalf of myself and my successors for ever to have for you the same diligent care and special solicitude as for the brethren.” Celano corroborates Clare’s words and says: “When the man of God had tested them, and knew by manifest signs that the Lady Clare and her sisters were ready for Christ’s sake to suffer the loss of all things and to work with their hands, inclining always before Christ’s holy commandment, to them and to all other women professing poverty in like fashion he promised the help and counsel of himself and his brothers for ever. He carried out this promise faithfully as long as he lived, and when the hand of death was on him he bade his disciples do likewise for, said he, we and these poor little women have been led from the world by the same spirit ... if we had not called them we should have done them no wrong; but were we to neglect them now where would be our charity? ... It is not my will that any man should visit them at his own choice and pleasure, but I command you, let spiritual men be appointed who by their lives have long proved themselves worthy, and do not desire this kind of service.’”

Given all this, Clare felt she was on firm ground, but in 1230 Gregory issued the Bull Quo Elongati which allowed trustees

to hold property for Franciscans, and restricted the Brothers' right to visit the Poor Ladies. Both these clauses were very disheartening to Clare and each was beset with difficulties. As regards the visiting, Elias had followed his masters direction, but Giovanni Parenti was not perhaps so close a personal friend of Clare, and his interpretation of the whole situation was more formal. He could allege the clause in the Rule of the friars which strictly forbade the Brothers from visiting any Sisters without explicit permission, and among the Brothers themselves there was great difference of opinion as to their obligation to beg for the Sisters. Obligation! How Francis would have hated the word; for him it was a privilege! The difficulty arose partly from the multiplication of the houses of the Second Order; the same old difficulty which beset the whole increase of the Fraternity.

Probably Gregory never intended the clause regarding trustees and visitors to apply to San Damiano, which was always on a different footing from any other house: and which appeared to be completely protected from any innovation by his letter to Giovanni Parenti. Clare, however, was not satisfied, and Celano says: "When the Lord Pope forbade the friars to visit the houses of the Poor Ladies without his special license the gentle Mother was grieved because she feared that her daughters would be able less frequently to partake of the food of holy doctrine, and groaning a little, she said, 'Now that he has deprived us of our spiritual almoners, let him also take away those that minister to our temporal needs'; and without delay she dismissed every one of the friars attached to her service. When the Pope heard what had happened he at once relaxed his prohibition, and committed the matter to the Minister General." Gregory indeed only had to insist on the observance of his own letter. Certainly Clare's old friends, Leo, Giles, and others of the early companions, were never

deterred from visiting San Damiano; we catch sight of them there all through her life.

Other Brothers also came, and neither Gregory nor Giovanni Parenti could really have wished to deprive Clare of the sermons she enjoyed, and a pleasant story is told of an English Brother, probably Haymo of Faversham, who was preaching. He was learned and eloquent, but Brother Giles, who was also present, evidently thought that his words were out of tune with the spirit of the house, for he called out: "Be still, Master, and I will speak." The English doctor stopped, and Giles broke out, "in the heat of the spirit of God," and when he had finished, the English Brother continued, while Clare greatly rejoiced even as though the dead were brought back to life, "for this was our holy Father's wish that a doctor in theology should have sufficient humility to be silent when a lay Brother wished to speak." San Damiano could also be called a school for good manners!

The difficulties regarding poverty were constantly and inevitably increasing, but Gregory obviously wished to help the Poor Ladies to observe their vow, and in 1235 he made an appeal to all Christians to "assist these women who are so weighed down by the burden of penury that it is impossible for them to live unless charitable folk stretch out their hands to relieve their necessities." He added an indulgence of forty days for whosoever did so.

His solicitude had also been shown in another letter written in 1228 which throws light not only on his personal friendship for Clare, but also on his ideal of the Sister's vocation. He writes:

Gregory to his dear daughter in Jesus Christ, the abbess Clare, and to the cloistered religious of the monastery of San Damiano at Assisi health and benediction.

Blessed be for ever the most high God to Whom you have consecrated yourselves as lowly handmaids, and Who by the grace of His holy Spirit has condescended to adopt you as His beloved daughters, to raise you to the sublime dignity of brides of His only Son, and Who will crown you with glory in Heaven. More than all others you are bound to love Jesus Christ with your whole hearts, to serve Him with your whole strength, and to reach out to Him with such ardour that nothing shall be able to separate you from His love.

Remember that of your own free will you have followed the divine call, that you have enclosed yourselves in these poor cells to the end that being free from the tumult of the world, and preserved from the snares of earthly vanity, you may unite yourselves by a pure and holy love to the heavenly Bridegroom, Whom you have preferred to all others until He shall introduce you into His eternal dwellings.

Let constant meditations on these holy truths sweeten the bitterness of the trials of life; and change into pleasures the pains you endure for love of Jesus, Who, for our sakes, suffered such shame and torment.

For ourselves, We can say you are our joy and consolation in all the cares and anxieties which continually oppress our heart. We therefore beseech you in our Lord, and if need be, we command you, by this apostolic letter, to be mindful of what we have done for you. Walk in the way of the spirit as we have taught you; endeavour to grow in perfection; forget the things of this world; always desire the better gifts according to the advice of the Apostle; and ever advance from virtue to virtue.

By acting thus you will be giving glory to God, and our own joy will be full, because we love you in Jesus Christ from the depth of our soul as children of predilection and brides of Jesus Christ. Therefore being convinced of your intimate

union with God, we entreat you to be always mindful of us in your prayers, and continually to raise your holy hands for us to the Lord, imploring Him to defend us from the countless dangers which surround our pontificate, to aid us in our infirmity, and to strengthen us in virtue, so that by the faithful discharge of our ministry, we may give to God the glory due to Him, joy to the Angels while obtaining grace for ourselves, and for all the children of Holy Church life everlasting. Dear Sister fare you well in the Lord.

Never was an old man more harassed in more directions than this indomitable Pope. There was the ever present problem of the spiritual reform within the Church, of the suppression of heresy, and of the dire dissensions between Eastern and Western Christendom. In all this Gregory had high hope in the friars; hence his preoccupation with all that concerned them: on the deepest and highest levels he was heart and soul with their ideals. Just about the time he was writing these letters to Clare yet another family of friars, the Servites, was springing into life through the action of a group of Florentines.

In every country the difficult relations between Church and State had to be watched; the Latin dominion of Constantinople was visibly crumbling; again the Pope was trying to galvanise the Christian rulers into a Crusade.

There were dangers on every side not lessened by the presence in Italy of the enigmatic and slippery and immensely gifted Frederick. In force of personality he and the Pope were perhaps equally matched, but the young genius lacked the backing of the institution which was behind Gregory. In the words of Brunetto Latini "the heart of Frederick only beat for being lord of all, and sovereign of the whole world." He considered himself to be the living personification of the law on earth, "and with consummate

ability he had consolidated his Sicilian dominions into an extremely well-ordered state. Frederick's many-sided ambition inevitably led to incessant friction with the Pope. In 1220 Gregory had crowned Frederick in Saint Peter's with magnificent pomp, and the Emperor swore to protect the Church and her possessions and promised to start a Crusade for the liberation of the Holy Sepulchre. Tradition says that he met Francis at Castel del Monte in 1221 on Francis' return from the east. A meeting of two magnets, and who can judge of its effects? Frederick had great appreciative power, and there are episodes in his life that may quite easily have been the result of that interview. He did not keep his promise for an immediate crusade, much to Gregory's disgust; neither was the Pope satisfied when Frederick did start on an independent expedition which in 1228 resulted in a treaty with the Sultan. By this Frederick obtained a ten years' truce during which time pilgrims were free to visit the Holy Places: it was a diplomatic success, but not exactly a victory for Christian arms. Two years later he was reconciled to the Pope, but the tension remained if only because Frederick was an incalculable genius and everything he did was exciting and exhibitionist. He could act simultaneously as the legislator, the reformer – of the Church as well as of everything else – the poet, the centre of the most brilliant, cosmopolitan, and learned court, the ruthless tyrant, and just about the time of Gregory's letter to Clare he was parading about Italy with a menagerie of elephants, dromedaries, camels, panthers, lions, leopards, falcons, and bearded owls. Frederick was one of Gregory's permanent anxieties: in his harassing life it is no wonder that he turned to San Damiano which is thus described by those who knew it:

“On the hill of San Damiano there germinated and flowered in the light of the sun the most exquisite virtues of adoring love, self-sacrificing charity, and the spirit of prayer that

touches the heart of God, the patience that bears the hardest things serenely and joyfully, and that lovely Christian modesty which is the sign of a soul mistress of itself." All hearts were united, all wills bent to the same end. Detached from themselves and all else, the Sisters thought only of imperishable goods. There at least he found Francis followers living as he had done, "as though alone with God."

Outwardly the Sisters' Rule was very rigorous, but they did not feel it so. The church and choir and refectory, the oratory and little terrace and dormitory have remained so untouched that the vase of flowers we see marking Clare's place at the refectory table might have been put there by one of her own Sisters, and it is possible, at least superficially to imagine the daily life of the community. It was very much a growing family, and besides Agnes and Ortolana, Clare's younger sister Beatrice had become a Poor Lady, as well as her niece, Amata. She too seems to have been a beautiful girl, and the day was already fixed for her marriage to a wealthy noble; but when she went to see her aunt, she realized her vocation, "I belong to God," and she never again left San Damiano. The families stormed and even threatened to burn down the monastery, but in vain, and history repeated itself for Amata's sisters, Balvina and Agnese, who joined the Order. And Clare was not the person to receive novices easily: even during Francis' lifetime she had shown her detection of the real vocation. On one occasion he had suggested several girls who wished to join the Poor Ladies; Clare doubted the vocation of one of them, but finally accepted her, and within a year the girl had left.

Several of the Sisters followed in the steps of Agnes and left the "beloved nest" to found other houses; for instance another Chiara and Agnese were sent to Barcelona, Lucia to Cortona, Benedetta to Siena and Spello, Cristiana to Campello. According to Wadding a list compiled in 1238

gives the following names; although it does not mention Ortolana there is no evidence that she was already dead. The names are extraordinarily musical: Agnese, Filippa, Giacomina, Balvina, Mansueta, Amata, Benvenuta, Benricevuta, Bonaventura, Consolata, Andrea, Aurea, Leonarda, Agata, Francesca, Angeluccia, Felicita, Massariola, Maria, Gregoria, Giovanna, Bennata, Lucia, Elia, Mattia, Stella, Lea, Beatrice, Bartolomea, Prassede, Erminia, Daniella, Chiarella, Pacifica, Vertera, Patrizia. Some of the names are doubled in the list, but the exact number seems uncertain.

These were the Sisters whom Clare taught daily both by example and word: she was a great believer in teaching and always wanted to be taught herself; hence her love of sermons. Celano says that the skill and tender discipline of her teaching were beyond description, and she taught her Sisters “how to drive distractions and noise from the mind, in order that in solitude and quiet they might penetrate into the things of God, and draw near to Him in loving attention. For the devil is even more cunning than men in throwing a noose round the pure and the saints. For this reason she wished that during certain hours they should be occupied with manual work according to the design of their Founder unless they were busy with prayer or some work of charity. At all costs they must avoid idleness “which enables the devil to fill the mind with vain thoughts and causes the love of God to grow cold.” She taught them too the inestimable value of silence, “for unbridled talk will always cause the mind to slip and dart hither and thither, silence keeps us close to God; careless speech always weakens our love for Him.” She herself was always abstemious in her use of words.

Clare promised these daughters absolute and holy poverty “which alone buys for us the precious pearl of ardent desire for God. No one can possess this who is hampered by temporal things.” In frequent exhortations she taught them that their community could only be acceptable to God when, abounding in poverty, they felt the lack of temporal goods. She ever encouraged them to conform themselves to Christ, naked upon the cross; Christ, that Poor One whose poor Mother had placed Him in the manger. This particular thought was to Clare “as a golden breastplate protecting her against the dust of earthly things.”

We see these same Sisters seated round the refectory table when, one day, there was only a single loaf for dinner. Sister Cecilia, who had been with Clare since 1213, was on duty as dispenser; her eyes and those of all the community were turned confidently to Clare. “Do, daughter, with trust what I tell thee,” was perhaps almost an unnecessary injunction. Clare then lifted up all their needs to Jesus Christ,” after which she gave the order that the loaf should be divided into two halves, one to be taken to the begging Brothers, and the other divided among all the Sisters, “and that half loaf sufficed abundantly for each sister to be fully satisfied.”

At this time Clare appears in the full power of her natural and supernatural gifts, and often it is hard to remember that she was also a chronic invalid. Her gifts had been matured by a discipline that controlled and enhanced her spiritual life, without ever making it rigid. Like Francis, habit never dulled her perception of grace either in nature or supernature. As each sunrise was a marvellous new creation, so each Mass, each Holy Communion, each recitation of the Office was a new contact with God. “In God and for God” was the motto of the house, and the Sisters never ceased to wonder at His love for them. The bread on the refectory table was set there by Him, the oil, the wine, the fruit of the

orchard were his gifts as were the alms brought in by the begging Brothers from the charity of others. Francis had put the words on the lips of every friar, "Praised and blessed be God the Lord God, give us alms for the love of God." For those who asked and those who received, the accent was on God, not on any human needs.

Clare was leading the contemplative life in its fullness, which means that all the powers of the soul are released and strengthened for the purpose of prayer. We catch glimpses of her through her companions, and Celano says that "because of her ceaseless meditation on the Passion often she appeared unconscious of everything as though she were dead. And often it seemed to her so bitter that Christ should have suffered such pain that it was as though her heart and soul were transfixed by a knife." She loved Him so dearly. At other times she appeared transported with joy at the thought of the redemption of human nature. And ever she besought her Sisters and novices that they should weep for the Passion of Jesus Christ. When she spoke thus her face was bathed in tears and her eyes seemed two water springs. Between the hours of Sext and None she did great bodily penance that she might immolate herself with the Lord, saying that during the time of Christ's Passion no one could weep sufficiently. One day while she was in her cell weeping, the devil came and gave her a blow on the face which made her mouth, nose, and ears bleed, and caused her cheek to swell, but she remained absorbed in the divine love. When praying she always remembered the wounds of Christ and recited daily the Office of the Passion as Saint Francis had taught her. Every night she took the discipline with a whip of five knotted cords, and she kept round her waist a cord of thirteen knots as a secret remembrance of the Passion.

In Holy Week she prayed and cried and meditated still more assiduously, and it happened that on Holy Thursday she was

in her cell, her mind filled with the thought, "My soul is sorrowful even unto death"; and her soul was so full of pain and sorrow that, sitting on her bed, she was lost in contemplation of the Passion, and all that night she remained unconscious of every bodily sensation, and entirely one with Jesus Christ received many new lights and revelations.

She had a disciple, a girl whom she greatly trusted, and to whom she had repeatedly said, "When you see that I am lost to myself and do not come among you, do not disturb me unless I am dying." At nightfall this Sister, finding her in a state of ecstasy, did not dare to approach and went away without saying a word to anyone of what she had seen for fear of disturbing the work of God. The following morning she returned, and found the abbess in the same position and state, and again left her undisturbed. At last when evening came she remembered with fear the warnings of Francis, and went up to Clare's cell with a lamp in her hand. "Mother, have you forgotten how Blessed Francis ordered you not to let a day pass without eating?" At these words Clare came back to herself. "Why have you brought a lamp? Is it not day?" "Dear Mother, you have not noticed that a day and night have passed, and this is the night of Good Friday." Then the abbess understood, but not wishing to publish the secrets of the Great King, she only said: "O what a blessed sleep I have had when I most needed it. O most blessed dream! O grace! But my daughter, keep this to yourself while I am in this world."

Like Francis, Clare was often "entirely occupied with God"; like him, she knew moments of anguish. "If you cry so much you will lose your sight," the evil spirit suggested to her, to which Clare answered that "no one is blind who contemplates God." "Go on crying then," was the retort,

“and you will see what you will suffer.” “Love that cannot suffer is not worthy of the name,” was Clare’s proud reply.

Her realization of the love of Christ in the Passion made her pray: “O Thou who hast so wounded my soul with love, do not ever heal me.” Her own love had to find an outlet in penance, and she was as unrelenting to her body as Francis had been to his. Presumably she obeyed his order about eating, given when she first became ill, and he had also insisted that she was to sleep on a mattress and straw-filled pillow instead of on the bare ground with a log under her head, but these mitigations were a sacrifice to her. Sister Agnes – not her own sister – on entering San Damiano in 1220 wanted to try Clare’s hair-shirt of boar’s hide, but she found it unendurable.

As with Francis some of Clare’s penances were visible to her Sisters, but none knew with what relentless observation she pursued self-will and self-love into the hidden crannies of her being, and with what determination she cast them out.

On another point of the spiritual life Clare faithfully followed Francis’ example and teaching. Saint Bonaventure tells of him that “when he returned from his private devotions, during which he would be transformed into a different man, his chief concern was to behave in the most ordinary manner so that the subtle fragrance of the favours he had been granted should not evaporate by being outwardly displayed. He often said to his familiars: When a servant of God experiences a divine consolation in prayer, he must say: “This consolation Thou hast sent to me, an unworthy sinner O Lord, and I commit it to Thy custody, for I feel that I am a thief of Thy treasures.” Francis never revealed the secrets of divine wisdom unless it was for the good of others, and he used to say: ‘It is easy to lose a priceless treasure, and thus cause the Giver to withhold it a second time.’”

Clare had made all this her rule, and her reticence grew with her love. In this love of the Passion the sign of the cross became something life-giving that transported her ever more deeply into the mystery of the love of Christ, and through this sign she received extraordinary graces, especially the power of healing. Celano writes: "The Beloved repaid His lover for her love with outward miraculous signs, for when she signed the sick and infirm with the cross their ills vanished." Sometimes she would touch the sufferer, but more often she made the sign of the cross while praying. "No one ever heard what she said while making the sacred sign," said Sister Pacifica, "for she always spoke very low." This power was of long standing, for already Francis had sent Brother Stephen to her when he was losing his reason, together with a leper to be thus signed and both were healed. Sister Cecilia was cured of a violent cough; Cristiana of deafness; Amata of dropsy; Benvenuta, who for two years had been voiceless, dreamed on the vigil of the Assumption that Clare would cure her next day, as indeed happened; another Benvenuta suffered from ulcers for twelve years and she too was cured. On another occasion, five Sisters in the infirmary were all instantaneously cured when Clare made the sign of the cross. There were many other cases, and the sick, and especially lepers, came from all round the countryside, and Clare shared her power of healing with Ortolana. "Go to my Mother, she will help you," and like her daughter, Ortolana would make the sign of the cross and pray, and her fame as a healer was also widespread.

Clare had, too, a great devotion for holy water because it represented the saving water that flowed from the wounded side of Christ, and therefore communicated the graces of the Passion; and above all for the Blessed Sacrament. In this she was in complete harmony with Francis of whom it was said that "every fibre of his heart was kindled into love for the sacrament of Christ's Body, and greatly wondering he

pondered on the condescending love of God.” He had considered it an unpardonable negligence not to hear Mass every day when possible. He communicated often and with such devotion that he enkindled the hearts of others.

“Because he revered the most holy Sacrament with all his heart . . . whenever he received the sweet and spotless Lamb he surrendered himself to God with that flaming ardour which ever glowed on the altar of his own heart.” Fie constantly exhorted his brothers to let no occasion slip for bringing others to know Christ living in the Blessed Sacrament; and in his Admonitions he says: “Why will men not recognize the truth and believe in the Son of God? . . . Daily He descends from the bosom of the Father upon the altar in the hands of the priests . . . and in this way Our Lord is ever with His faithful as He Himself says, ‘Behold I am with you always.’”

His intense reverence for priests sprang from this worship of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, and he repeated, “I desire to fear, love and honour all priests as my lords, and I am unwilling to consider sin in them because in them I see the Son of God. And this because in this world I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood which priests receive and alone administer to others.”

“Consider your dignity O my brothers who are priests, and be holy because God is holy. . . . It is a great misfortune and miserable fault to have Him so near you and be thinking of anything else in the world. . . . O amazing splendour and astounding condescension! The Master of the universe, God Himself, humbles Himself to hide for our salvation under the feeble appearance of bread. . . . Keep nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that He may possess you entirely who has given Himself wholly for you.”

In an age of many abuses Francis declared that were he confronted with an angel and an unworthy priest, he would kiss the hand that had touched the Body of Christ before he saluted the angel. He put this into practice one day when he was preaching in a Lombard village. Someone in the crowd pointed to a priest asking, "Tell us, good man, how can he be a shepherd who is living himself in notorious sin?"

Instantly Francis knelt before the priest, kissing his hands. "I do not know whether or not these hands are clean, but even if unclean the power of the sacraments they administer is not diminished. These hands have touched my Lord, and out of reverence for Him, I honour His vicar. For himself he may be bad; for me he is good."

Clare perforce was deeply impressed by this devotion of Francis; his attitude had been her school. Even before his conversion he sent costly and beautiful gifts to adorn poor churches; nothing was good enough for the dwelling place of Christ. Clare did the same, and even during her long illness she had herself propped up in bed, and made many things of the finest material for churches of Umbria. Sister Francesca told how she had counted some hundred corporals made by Clare, and she had seen a beautiful Child in the Host while It was being brought to Clare in Holy Communion, and on another occasion that same Child was resting on her heart and covering her with luminous wings.

Celano describes how "when Clare came to Holy Communion she wept hot tears of love, and was filled with the utmost awe and reverence towards the Lord of Heaven and earth who thus abased Himself. She cried so much that it seemed as though her heart were being poured out. For her the thought of the consecrated Host was as awe inspiring as that of God the Creator of all things. Even in illness she was always perfectly recollected in Christ, and always thanked

Him for all her sufferings and for this the blessed Christ often visited and comforted her, and gave her great joy in Himself." She often said, "This is our honour that we carry God in our heart."

It seems to me that Francis and Clare must be considered as heralds of that increasing devotion to the Blessed Sacrament which rather later was to culminate in the miracle of Bolsena and the feast of Corpus Christi. Already that devotion was beginning in the Low Countries where their contemporary Saint Juliana of Liege had seen a vision of a shining sphere in which a section was lacking, and it was revealed to her that the sphere was the Church's liturgical year, and the missing section, a feast in honour of the Blessed Sacrament. A local celebration of such a feast was sanctioned in Liege a year before Clare's death, but she may easily have heard of Juliana's vision through the friars who were already established in Belgium and through her correspondence with Sister Ermentrude. On their side, the Brothers would certainly have spread the knowledge of Francis and Clare's intense devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. At any rate this is one of the may-have-been's of history.

There were many outward signs of Clare's rich spirituality, and these were noted by her Sisters who all stress the humility, patience, and kindness of the woman who, as a girl, had asserted herself so vigorously. One Sister told how she would lie prostrate before the altar in the deepest self-abasement, and "when she prostrated herself in this manner it seemed as though she were kissing the feet of Christ." The place where she habitually prayed was often seen so filled with light that the Sisters had the impression of material fire. Often she herself was surrounded with light, and Agnes – who had been in San Damiano almost from childhood – saw the Christ Child near Clare during a sermon of Brother Philip

and heard the words: "I am in the midst of them": she saw Clare with stars all round her, and an indescribable sweetness filled Agnes' heart. Another time she saw Clare holding the Christ Child and told how "she held Him joyfully and talked familiarly with Him." All the eyewitnesses lay emphasis on light in their descriptions of Clare: and they agreed in saying that when she "came from prayer her face was more shining and beautiful than the sun and she comforted them with the words of God so that they rejoiced as though she was come from Heaven." It was her habit to remain a long time in the chapel after Compline praying with her Sisters; and often it was she who rang the bell for Matins, the bell that is still preserved in San Damiano.

A very impressive testimony is that of Filippa, who told how "Clare was always gay in the Lord, and was never seen to be disturbed; her life appeared entirely angelic." Yet besides the usual difficulties of community life Clare shared in many of the problems of the whole Fraternity; she had to face the daily question of poverty, she saw this most precious poverty continually in jeopardy. To be always gay and never disturbed meant that her trust in God had reached the point of heroic virtue.

Sister Beatrice – her own younger sister – said "she lived in purity, humility, patience, benignity, correcting when necessary, but admonishing her sisters tenderly, assiduous in prayer and contemplation, in abstinence and fasting, in harshness of bed and clothing, despising herself in the fervour of love of God, in the desire for martyrdom, and in love with the privilege of poverty." The presence of Christ was felt by all the Sisters: "they had only one heart and soul, and spoke one language, that of love."

When Clare was too ill to go down to the chapel she heard Mass through a trap door in the upstairs oratory; and Celano

comments on how “wonderfully power had been made perfect in infirmity as is most evident from the fact that during twenty-eight years of continual illness she uttered no word of complaint, but only holy conversation and acts of thanksgiving ever came from her lips.” Very rightly this aspect of her spiritual achievement impressed everyone, and she, who had always been so rigorous to her own body, was very careful of her Sisters. If anyone was ill, Clare was the first to see that they were kept warm and well fed. It was during the years of illness, when unable to walk, that she used to be carried to the little terrace overlooking the valley of Spoleto, from which she could see at least the woods round Santa Maria degli Angeli. There she could indulge her love of flowers and the narrow space became a little garden. It is said that she preferred the rose as symbolizing love; the violet, humility; and the lily, purity. San Damiano is full of the poetry of the love of God, and in it Francis, Clare, and the first Sisters have left the breath of their own spirit as gentle as the most serene sky. Every stone tells something of the beginning, the continuing, and the ending of the life of holiness, that is life in union with God.

It is thought that what is now a corner of the dormitory was Clare’s cell, and the process of canonization notices one small episode that must have happened here. “Like Francis, Clare could make herself understood by the creatures, and by means of her innocence she could make them obey her. Sister Francesca told how once when she was suffering too much to move she wanted a certain small cloth, but that at that moment there was no one to bring it so the little cat of the monastery started to drag it towards her. “Then the Lady Clare said to the cat, ‘O naughty one, you don’t know how to carry it, why do you drag it along the ground?’ And the little cat, as though it understood her, began to roll up the cloth and brought it in its mouth so that it did not touch the ground.

So the life of San Damiano flowed on. Clare and her Sisters were putting Gregory's words into practice by keeping the great Christian truths steadily in mind: they were also experiencing the reality of his assurance that in this way the bitterness of life would be transformed into sweetness. It was what Francis taught, and what he promised to all his followers.

The Irradiation

Celano was right when he emphasized the fact of Clare's influence radiating in ever widening circles. This came about partly through the tremendous expansion of the whole Franciscan family during those years. Missions were starting in every direction, in every country of Europe the friars were gaining ground, houses were being opened, churches built, and often these same friars were entrusted with all kinds of delicate and important diplomatic missions by the Holy See. In Italy Giovanni Parenti was used by the Pope as mediator with the rebellious Romans and with the Florentines. The Franciscans were everywhere and the ideals for which they stood attracted into the Fraternity princes, nobles, and scholars just as readily as the poor and unlearned. The order was growing with springlike vitality, with the natural result that the rule was constantly being strained this way and that to meet new situations. The lines, which now appear as hard and fast and clear cut, were then nothing of the kind; the rule was being lived in the daily efforts of the most divergent and strong personalities, and even a surge of resentment against some innovation or regulation was probably balanced by something else which is now lost sight of. News is always something exceptional; the dissensions of the Order were all noticed, but not its underlying unity.

There was a tremendous gust of sanctity in the Order which expressed itself through the most different men and women.

Saint Anthony, who had rebuked the tyrant Ezzelino to his face, died in 1231 and was canonized within a year; Gregory's words on that occasion were prophetic, "I will give you to all nations. Elizabeth of Hungary also died in that year, and was canonized shortly afterwards. At the translation of her body in 1236 Frederick II reappears in a new light. He had wanted to marry her but she had refused, and on this occasion he asked for the honour of helping to carry her body. All the German princes were present, with many bishops and archbishops and a host of the faithful. The Emperor walked barefoot with the crown on his head, and during the ceremony he placed it on the coffin with the words: "I could not crown her on earth, but at least I will crown her as an immortal queen in the kingdom of God." He wrote to Elias at the time asking for the prayers of the brothers. Saint Elizabeth was the chief of a clan of saints; we need only remember her aunt Saint Hedwig of Poland, her cousins Saint Louis of France, and his sister Isabelle who having also refused Frederick's offer of marriage became a Poor Clare. There was Saint Louis of Toulouse, Elizabeth's great-nephew; Saint Elizabeth of Portugal, her great-niece, who likewise became a Poor Clare; there was her niece Saint Margaret of Hungary; her cousins Saint Ferdinand of Castile and his two daughters; King Wenceslaus of Bohemia and his sister Blessed Agnes, also a Poor Clare. There were the Queens Marguerite of France and Salome of Galicia; Helena, sister of the king of Portugal; Cunegonde, duchess of Poland; Saint Casimir of Poland; all in some way or other connected with the Franciscan Orders. Directly or indirectly Clare touched all these lives, and nearly all of them touched hers.

New convents of the Second Order were perpetually being opened; in many places several houses of Poor Ladies existed in the same place. There were convents in Florence, Spello, San Severino, Perugia, Foligno, Lucca, Siena, Arezzo, Nami, Città di Castello, Todi, Tortona, Faenza, Milan, Rome,

Padua, Trent, Verona, Orvieto, Gubbio, Terni, Spoleto, and Rieti. It is worth remembering that Frederick II founded two Poor Clare houses in Messina. All these came into being during Clare's lifetime, as well as others in Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Belgium, Bohemia, and Poland.

The first idea of a foundation of the Second Order in France apparently originated with the Archbishop of Rheims when he was in Rome for the Lateran Council of 1215. He spoke to Saint Francis on the subject, and four years later Maria de Braye was put in charge of a group of Sisters who set out for Rheims taking with them a corporal made by Clare, and a cord and veil she had used. Their first chapel was dedicated to Saint Damian, and they were known as the "Poor Women of Saint Damian." Maria de Braye died in 1230, and Clare put the choice of her successor into the hands of Giovanni Parenti which is another indication of the union of the First and Second Orders. Sister Egidia di Porte was chosen, to whom Clare sent a piece of linen marked with blood from the stigmata of Saint Francis. When a larger chapel was consecrated it was dedicated to Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, who was already the patroness of the Third Order. From Rheims the Order of Saint Damian spread to Bordeaux, Beziers, Toulouse, Besancon, and Montpellier. Saint Louis greatly favoured the Poor Ladies of Rheims, and his sister Isabelle founded the monastery of Longchamps.

All this points to considerable correspondence between Clare and her scattered daughters and among them there stands out the figure of Blessed Agnes of Prague. She was the daughter of King Premislaus and Queen Constantia who was a Hungarian princess, and Agnes had been promised in marriage to Frederick II by her father. After his death the plan was much favoured by her brother King Wenceslaus; but Agnes heart was set on the cloister and she appealed to the Pope. The engagement was cancelled, and the Emperor

agreed with a good grace saying: "Had she refused me for a man, I would have run my sword through him, but since she prefers the King of Heaven I will stand aside." Elizabeth of Hungary's life and death must have been a powerful influence with her cousin, and she was canonized just about the time that Agnes, after giving all her fortune to endow a hospital, took the veil in the first convent of Poor Ladies in Bohemia founded by her brother the King.

In 1238 the Pope wrote her a most important letter (*Angelis Gaudium*) which includes some details about the primitive rule given by Saint Francis to the Poor Ladies; and also describes the rule he had himself recently compiled and his reasons for doing this. He enforced this rule on Blessed Agnes and her Sisters, most of whom no doubt were friends who had followed her from the world to the cloister. It is interesting to know that their spiritual director at first was Brother Giovanni di Pian Carpine who became famous as a missionary in China.

Agnes' letters to Clare have disappeared, but happily we have four of Clare's to her. They are in the *Acta Sanctorum* under the date of March 6; and in 1914 the late Mr. Walter Seton found fourteenth-century copies of them in German in the libraries of Berlin and Bamberg. The first letter to the Bohemian princess was evidently written when the news reached Clare of Agnes' determination not to marry Frederick, and to live in poverty. Here is the text.

To the illustrious and venerable virgin Agnes, daughter of the most excellent and mighty king of Bohemia, Clare the unworthy servant of Jesus Christ, and the useless servant of the enclosed Ladies in the monastery of Saint Damian in Assisi, offers her humble homage, and in all things commends herself to you, while most respectfully wishing you the glory of eternal joy.

I have heard of the sanctity and perfect rectitude of your life; indeed the fame of it is known to almost all the world. For this I greatly rejoice in the Lord, and my heart overflows with gladness; and not only mine, but the heart of all those who serve, and desire to serve Jesus Christ. Truly you could have enjoyed all the highest honours of the world, and have shared the imperial throne with him whom you might lawfully have married even as he wished, and which would have been becoming to his rank and your own. Instead you have renounced all this to choose in its place with your whole heart and soul the way of most holy poverty and mortification. Thus you receive the noblest of bridegrooms the Lord Jesus Christ, who will preserve the treasure of your virginity always intact and unspotted, for His love will be the sure protection of your chastity, His touch will purify you more and more, and possessing Him you will always remain a virgin. His power surpasses any earthly might; His magnanimity is unequalled, His beauty is incomparable, there is no love like unto His, and in Him is the perfection of grace. You are now bound to Him in love for He has adorned your breast with precious stones and pierced your ears with rings of inestimable value, He has given you a girdle of finest gold, and set on your head a golden crown bearing the arms of sanctity.

Therefore dearest sister, or rather Lady, whom I cannot sufficiently revere since you are the bride, the mother and sister of my Lord Jesus Christ; be proud to walk under the shining banner of inviolable virginity and most holy poverty. Let your heart burn with the desire to follow Christ, poor and crucified, who suffered for us upon the cross to snatch us from the power of the prince of darkness to whom we were bound through original sin, and to reconcile us to God, His Father.

O blessed poverty who givest eternal riches to those who love and embrace her! O holy poverty, it is enough to desire thee and to share in thee for God to promise us the kingdom of Heaven, eternal glory and a life of rest and blessedness! O beloved poverty whom our Lord Jesus Christ found worthy of His love, He to whom heaven and earth and all creation are eternally subject! For the foxes have holes, and the birds have nests, but the Son of man had no place to lay His head; and Christ allowed His head to rest upon His breast only at the moment of His death.

Truly when so great a Lord descended into the womb of a virgin He appeared to the world as one despised and needy and poor, and this He did that men who are so destitute, so indigent, so famished for celestial food might become rich in the kingdom prepared for them above.

Therefore you must exult with spiritual delight, for having preferred the contempt of the world to its honours, and poverty to the riches that perish, in heaven you are gaining an ample recompense, and there treasures are safe from the rust that corrupts, and the moths that devour, and thieves do not break through and steal. In heaven, and even from this very moment you have the right to be called the sister, the bride and the mother of the All Highest Son of God and of His Virgin Mother.

I feel assured that you believe the kingdom of heaven to be reserved for the poor since the love of earthly riches causes us to lose the fruits of divine love. You cannot serve God and mammon, for either you love one and hate the other, serve one and despise the other. A fully clothed man cannot fight with one who is naked for his garments and harness will offer themselves to the grip of his enemy. We cannot expect to live in splendour in this world, and then to reign with Christ in the other; and it is easier for a camel to pass through the

eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into heaven. Because of this you have thrown off the superfluous garments of temporal riches that they should not hamper you in the fight; you have chosen the narrow path to enter the gate of heaven. What a great and happy exchange which consists in abandoning the good things of earth for those of eternity, to relinquish one and to receive an hundred and to possess a joy which can never end.

Therefore I humbly implore you, excellent and holy sister, for the love of Christ fortify yourself in the service of God, always progress unfaltering and unafraid from virtue to virtue that He, whom you will have served with all your heart may deign to give you as you desire. And further I beg you in the Lord to remember in your holy prayers me your useless servant and the sisters of my monastery who are all devoted to you. Pray that by the help of God we may be enabled to call upon the mercy of Jesus Christ and with you to enjoy His blessedness, in the Beatific Vision. Farewell in the Lord: pray for me. Alleluia.

What a human letter it is. Clare was as well aware of the desirability of the good things Agnes was renouncing as she was of the complete worth-whileness of the sacrifice. The jewels of an empress were dim indeed compared with those of a bride of Christ. She knew to the full the desirability of poverty, but she also knew the cost, and therefore she appealed to Agnes' courage and endurance. She was not disappointed, and she and Agnes were sister souls in fortitude.

This first letter was sent with five Sisters who were intended as a nucleus for the formation of the Prague Community; they also took a copy of the Rule, an illuminated *Pater*, a veil, a chalice, a wooden drinking bowl and cord all belonging to Clare, and Agnes preserved the veil and chalice

in a reliquary studded with precious stones. She took the veil at Pentecost, probably in 1235, and from that time until her death in 1282 she fought for poverty as valiantly as Clare herself.

Clare sent Agnes a second letter not long after the first, aware no doubt of the difficulties of the young community. The theme is indicated in the title, "Health and Perseverance in Most High Poverty."

To Agnes, daughter of the King of kings, virgin among virgins, the bride of Jesus Christ and therefore a queen, I, Clare the useless and unworthy servant of the Poor Ladies send my greetings and my ardent wish to see you live always in the greatest poverty.

I thank the Giver of all grace from whom as we know comes every good and every perfection that He has adorned you with so many virtues, and has brought you to the point of perfection and makes you a faithful follower of our father. He it is who enables you to receive into your soul such perfection that the Eye of God finds in you no fault. This perfection will unite you in the joy of eternity to the King of Heaven who dwells in glory on a throne of stars.

By refusing the hand of an emperor and casting away all the pomps of the world, you have embraced with holy love blessed poverty, and in the spirit of deep humility and fervent love you have set out to walk in the footsteps of Jesus whose bride you are.

Knowing your virtues I will not importune you with long speeches; though I am sure you would find nothing superfluous in any words of spiritual consolation. One only thing seems to me as necessary, and for the love of God I exhort you that as you have offered yourself to Him as an

agreeable sacrifice, so always remember your vocation; and like another Rachel never lose sight of this starting point. The fruits of your action are already in your hand; keep them safely; whatever you do, do it well; never be content with the present state; on the contrary hasten willingly and joyfully along the path of the evangelical counsels and never let the dust of this world hinder your feet. Never stop; always move onwards in the way of perfection which you have chosen believing nothing and consenting to nothing that might hinder your course. With glad confidence aim at that perfection to which the Spirit of God has called you so that your vows may be acceptable to God. Keep these uppermost in your thoughts, and if you need advice follow that of Brother Elias our Minister General; be sure and heed his counsels more than those of anyone else, and hold them as the most precious you can receive.

Should anyone try to detach you from your vocation never listen to such suggestions even were you to acquire the highest worldly power and honour. As a poor virgin, hold fast to Christ the Poor One; tell yourself that it was for your sake that He became abject and despised, and follow Him gladly consenting for His love to be yourself despised in the eyes of men.

Your Bridegroom is the most beautiful of the children of men, yet for your salvation He was disfigured beyond recognition, His body was torn by flagellation and He died on the cross amidst the most intense sufferings. Think of all this, O illustrious Queen, and perforce your heart will burn with the desire to suffer with Him and to imitate Him. If you thus suffer, you will be glorified with Him, if you weep with Him, you will also rejoice, if you remain on the cross with Him, you will dwell with Him in Heaven in the light of the saints. Your name will be written in the book of Life for ever and ever; you will have exchanged the perishable goods of this world

with those that are eternal, and you will live in unending joy and blessedness.

Farewell dearest sister, virgin blessed through your Beloved. My sisters and I rejoice greatly at the graces which God has bestowed upon you. May your community join with you in praying for us to the Lord our God.

The mention of Elias fixes the date of this letter as being before 1239, in which year he ceased to be Minister General. Like the first, it too shows Clare's power of sympathy, her appreciation of another's difficulties and dangers, her sense of when to encourage and when to say the harder word. She leads Agnes as Francis had led her by the love of Christ crucified which was the heart of her own life, in which she felt Agnes to be a twin sister, as well as a spiritual daughter.

So close were the two in their devotion to poverty that by 1238 Agnes was begging Gregory IX for a Privilege of Poverty which was granted. Evidently, however, from the time of her profession Agnes had been dissatisfied with the existing rule, and set to work to compile one of her own for the Prague convent. She must have applied to Clare for details of the fasting observances at San Damiano, for Clare's third letter seems to be in answer to such inquiries. It is of great historical importance for it contains a passage from the original Form of Life.

To the virgin whom in Jesus Christ I honour above all others, and who holds the first place in the human love of my heart, to my sister Agnes, daughter of his serene highness, the King of Bohemia, and now the sister and bride of the King of Heaven, I, Clare, the humble and unworthy servant of God and of the Poor Ladies, send greetings in the Lord Jesus with every good wish for her salvation and all that she wishes for that is best.

The tidings I have received of your health and progress in the path of salvation fill my heart with intense joy in our Lord. I feel that in imitating Jesus Christ, the Poor and Humble One, you indeed make amends for me and for my other sisters when our imperfections prevent us from faithfully following the divine pattern.

I deeply rejoice, and no one can take this joy from me when I see you realizing what is the greatest desire under Heaven, and I see you triumphing over the wiles of the enemy, of pride and vanity which throw folly into men's hearts and bring them to destruction. You owe this to the grace of God which surrounds you, and to your own rare prudence. You have found the treasure spoken of in the Gospels; you have received it from the hands of Him who creates all things out of nothing; and it is given to you as the reward of your humility, your faith, and the poverty you have embraced. To use the words of the Apostle I hold you to be the co-worker with God Himself for the support and comfort of the weak and failing members of the ineffable Body of Christ! O dearest daughter, rejoice unceasingly in the Lord, and let no bitterness trouble your gladness.

In Christ I love you, a virgin who are the joy of angels and the crown of your sisters, and I say to you place your spirit before the mirror of eternity, place your soul before the splendour and glory of God, place your heart before the divine Essence, and may this contemplation of God transform you entirely into His image. Thus you will be drawn to share the experience of the friends of God who taste that hidden sweetness which God the all-powerful has reserved for them from the beginning, and for all those who do not hesitate to abandon this deceitful world however seductive it may appear to those who are so blind as to attach themselves to it.

Love God with all your heart for He has given Himself entirely for love of you without reserve, love Him before whose beauty the sun and moon are pale while there is no limit to His power. Love this most high Son of God who was born of a spotless Virgin, keep close to this gentle Mother who conceived Him whom the vast heavens cannot hold, and bore Him, as a poor little Being within her immaculate body. How could we not rebel against the deceits of our enemy who tempts us through vainglory and fugitive advantages to lose a good that is greater than the heavens!

For my part the grace of God convinces me that among all creatures, the soul of a faithful man is greater than the heavens; for while all other creatures are incapable of containing their Creator, one single faithful soul can be His throne and dwelling; and this is a gift unknown to those who do not believe. God who is the Truth has Himself assured us of it: "He who loves Me shall be loved of My Father; I too will love him; and We will come and make Our abode in him." As the glorious Virgin bore the God-Man within her, so we, if we imitate Mary in her poverty and humility may carry that same Saviour spiritually in our hearts, thus containing in ourselves Him, the Lord who in Himself contains all things.

You and your sisters who despise the riches of this world will be the dwelling place of the Lord in all His plenitude, while earthly kings and queens who in their pride would exalt themselves until their head is lost in the clouds of heaven will perish on the dung heap.

I come now to the explanations you have asked for regarding those feast days when we have complete latitude in the choice of our food. I will transcribe for you the prescriptions which our holy Father Francis gave as to how each of us should celebrate these feasts.

Saint Francis ordered and commanded that any sisters who are delicate and infirm should be treated with the greatest solicitude and be provided with all the food they require. Otherwise no sister who is strong and healthy has the right to follow any regime but that of Lent, no matter whether the day be a feast or a feria. Fasting is perpetual, except for Christmas day when we can eat two meals; likewise those who do not feel able for fasting may eat two meals on Thursdays.

The rest of us who are strong fast every day except Sundays, Christmas Day, and in Paschal tide as we are instructed to do in the rule of our holy father Francis. Neither are we bound to fast on the feasts of Blessed Mary the Virgin, or the holy Apostles unless such feasts should fall on a Friday. Those of us who are strong and well eat any fare that is allowed in Lent.

Seeing, however, that our bodies are not of brass, and that our strength is not that of stone, but on the contrary that we are weak and subject to corporal infirmities, I vehemently beseech of you in the Lord to abstain from that exceeding rigour of fasting in which I know you indulge, so that placing in Christ all your life and hope, you may offer Him in reasonable service and to this end let your holocaust be duly seasoned with the salt of discretion.

In Christ I wish you good health and all you may desire. Commend us, my sisters and me to the prayers of your holy companions.

Clare the contemplative never gave a better description of the secret of her own long hours of solitary prayers. In this self-revealing letter she gives a picture of the inner life of a Poor Clare as a co-worker of God in the sublime task of saving souls. "You have made yourself the support and

strength of the weak and failing members of the ineffable Body of Christ.” This is the heroic Christ-life of unity in charity of which Saint Paul wrote, and which is the life of the Second Franciscan Order.

Clare's remark about the naked and clothed fighters is also revealing for it shows her fighting for poverty with the same common sense sort of arguments as those used by Francis, and which no one could contradict! At the time she wrote those words which she was quoting from Saint Gregory's homily in the Office of a Martyr, she did not know that in the Benedetti family of Todi there was a boy of ten who would become first a successful lawyer, and then, as Fra Jacopone, would be one of Poverty's most impassioned knights as well as one of the greatest of spiritual poets.

Povertè è nulla havere,
Ed onni cosa possedere
In spirito di libertate.

The great Lauds of Jacopone would have set the inmost chords of Clare's heart vibrating.

It had taken twenty years of experience to teach Clare that “our bodies are not of brass.” She had been forced to allow that Brother Ass cannot be too roughly treated; perhaps like Saint Francis she begged his pardon; anyhow she was quite ready to counsel the salt of discretion to others. One wonders whether Agnes profited by the advice!

The text of the Rule compiled by her is lost, but we have the answer in Gregory's Bull, *Angelis Gaudium*, published in May, 1238, and it contained a flat refusal for any sanction. Coming so soon after the concession of the Privilege of Poverty, this must have been a disappointment to Agnes, and the Pope gives as his reason that the Rule and

constitutions which he had drawn up for the Poor Ladies with great care in 1219 had been accepted by Blessed Francis, confirmed by the then Pope Honorius III, and was professed by all the convents of Poor Ladies including San Damiano. He stresses the fact that “Clare and her sisters observe it laudably in place of Saint Francis’ earlier rule.”

The friendship of Clare and Agnes is a lovely episode in both their lives, an example of the intimacy of two human beings who have never seen each other’s faces, but who have met in the love of Christ.

Clare’s fourth letter to Agnes seems to have been written towards the end of her life perhaps in answer to some complaint of the latter on the gaps in their correspondence. It sounds a note of leave-taking as though new light were streaming in through an opening door, and she seems to be wanting to tell her friend and sister of the glory of the poverty of the incarnate Saviour as she had known it in her own ecstatic prayer. She writes:

To her who is the half of my own soul and a particular sanctuary of divine love, Agnes an illustrious queen, and my beloved mother and dearest of daughters. It is to you that I, Clare the unworthy servant of Christ and the useless servant of the monastery of Saint Damian’s send my greeting and my wish that you may take your place with the other wise virgins before the throne of God and of the Lamb, there, where a new song will be sung and His lovers follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

O my mother and daughter, bride of the immortal King, I beg of you do not be surprised if I have not written as often as both our souls desired; and I should be distressed if you could believe that the burning love for you could ever be

even slightly lessened. Tell yourself that I love you even as your own mother.

The only reason for the infrequency of our correspondence has been lack of messengers and the dangers of the roads. I am seizing an opportunity of writing to you today; and in your charity it seems to me that we are reunited in one joy. O bride of Christ, indeed I rejoice in the Holy Spirit that He has inspired you to follow the example of the first Agnes and united you to the spotless Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

To you it has been given to enjoy the wonders of this heavenly union which amazes the hosts of Heaven, which is the desire of all hearts so that the thought of it fills us with joy and the excellence of it fills us with an indescribable sweetness. This union can cause the dead to rise, and the glorious vision of it delights all the hosts of Heaven for in it they behold reflected the splendour of the glory of God, the immaculate radiance of eternal light.

O queen and bride of Jesus Christ, look each day into the mirror which reflects this light; more and more you will see the reflection of your own face; adorn your house within and without with every flower of virtue, and put on the garment due to the daughter and bride of the King of Kings.

O my beloved daughter, divine grace will permit you to find your joy in contemplating this mirror. Come, look into it with me! On one side there is Jesus, lying in the manger in the midst of the utmost poverty and wrapped in miserable clothes. O admirable humility! O stupefying poverty! The King of angels, the Saviour of heaven and earth lies in the manger. In the middle of this mirror you will see holy and humble poverty for love of whom the Saviour consented to suffer so grievously for the redemption of mankind. Then

look at the other side which shows that ineffable love which flung the Saviour on to the wood of the cross there to die an infamous death. Let us put down our mirror on the cross; and we shall understand those words which fall on each of us: "O all you who pass by this way, stay and see whether there be any sorrow like to Mine/ 1 As far as is in us, united in heart and voice let us together answer Him, who groaning, calls to us, "Yes, Master, I will remember You, and my spirit will share in Your sufferings."

O queen, let your own heart be warmed in the fervour of this Love; be mindful too of the ineffable delights of the King of Heaven, of the eternal honour and riches that He offers you, and panting for desire of Him call to Him from the depths of your heart: "Draw me to Thyself, O Lord, and I will strive unceasingly in Thy fragrance, O celestial Bridegroom, until Thou shalt bring me into Thy house where Thy right hand will be held out to me, and I shall receive Thy kiss."

In the midst of this contemplation remember me your poor mother, for I carry the memory of you graven in the depths of my heart since you are dearer to me than any. What can I say? Human language must be silent, for no words will ever express the love I feel for you my blessed daughter. What I write is all too insufficient, but you must receive it kindly, recognizing at least a reflection of the love of your mother which burns day by day for you and for your spiritual daughters.

O most worthy sister Agnes, commend me urgently with my daughters to all yours. Goodbye, most beloved, to you and your sisters until we meet before the throne of the glory of God. Pray to Him for us.

My messengers today are our dear brothers Amato, dear to God and men, and Bonagura whom I commend to you with

all my heart.

How welcome those brothers must have been when at last they reached Prague! In this letter, as revealing as the former ones, Agnes surely felt the full power as well as the joy of Clare's presence, and her life reflected most faithfully the same love as Clare's. It was said of her that she "worked like any charwoman or cook not with an angry or sour countenance, but with joy, and by her sweet face showing she was the true servant of Christ." She had special care for any sister who was ill, she insisted that the food for an invalid must be daintily cooked, and wore herself out with untiring energy so that the sick might be freed from pain and restored to health. Her last words to her daughters were, "Love God and trust in Him; He will ever come to your help. Hold fast to poverty, for it is the life, the bone and blood of our order."

Only one other of Clare's correspondents is known to us, and she is very different from Agnes of Bohemia. Ermentrude was a pious girl in Cologne who prayed incessantly for the souls of her dead parents. One day she saw Heaven and Hell open before her, and a voice warned her that she would gain Heaven with other virgins to whom she would be a spiritual mother if she followed the advice of her spiritual director. This priest was a Dominican and after celebrating Mass for her intention he assured her that God wished her to leave her home which she did with a companion named Sapientia. They reached Bruges and spent twelve years near the city in prayer and meditation during which time they were joined by several other young women. Ermentrude felt that her little group needed a more definite rule and she consulted the Friars Minor who had been established in Bruges since 1233. From them she heard of Clare, to whom she wrote and received the following answer.

To my dear sister Ermentrude, I, Clare of Assisi, wish all health and peace.

I have learnt, dear sister, that by the grace of God you have renounced the world. This has filled me with gladness, and I greatly admire the generosity of your resolution, and the great fervour with which you and your excellent companions are setting out along the path of perfection. I pray you to keep faithful to the divine Bridegroom to whom you have consecrated yourselves; and be sure that your efforts will be rewarded with the crown of immortality. The period of trial is short; that of the reward unending. Do not let yourselves be discouraged by the splendour of the world which will pass like a shadow; do not be deceived by appearances that are false. It is true the devil will torment you by horrible suggestions; but be strong, shut your ears and you will put him to flight.

Beware, beloved, that you are not overthrown by adversity, and that your heart does not swell with pride in prosperity, for the sign of faith is to make us humble in success, and unmoved by failure. Give to God what you have vowed to Him, give it with scrupulous care, He will know how to repay your sacrifices. Lift your eyes continually to Heaven, for it is Heaven that calls to you to take up your cross and follow Jesus Christ who precedes you for it is written that only through much tribulation is it given to enter into the kingdom of God.

With the whole strength of your soul love God who is infinitely adorable, and His divine Son who deigned to be crucified for our sins; let the thought of Him be always in your mind. Meditate continually on the mysteries of His Passion, and on the sufferings endured by His holy Mother beneath the cross. Watch and pray unceasingly, and apply

all your strength to finish the good work which you have begun so well.

Accomplish your duties by living in complete poverty and in sincere humility. Let no fear deter you from your path, beloved daughter, and you will find that the Lord is faithful in all His words, and holy in all His works. The abundance of His blessings will fall on you and your sisters; He will be your defence, your consolation, your Redeemer, your reward in eternity. Let us pray for each other; and thus by bearing the yoke of charity we shall be enabled more easily to observe the law of Jesus Christ.

According to one tradition Ermentrude went to Rome some twelve years later to beg a favour from the Pope, and on her return she passed by Assisi only to find that Clare was already dead; but another version places the journey in 1250 and Clare is reported to have said to her: "Dear Sister and daughter, be faithful to the work you have undertaken. God has warned you through me that the devil will do his utmost to hinder it, but he will not succeed. Place all the strength of your heart in God; only He will be your help."

We can take the last sentence as Clare's message to all Christians, always!

These letters admit us into the inner sanctuary of Clare's spiritual life which, in varying degrees, was that of all her Sisters. It was a life cultivated in penance and self-discipline, and Clare's teaching to her own community was probably transmitted by the Brothers to others. As the years passed, everything she said and did became more important. The chief points of her spiritual teaching were detachment from all earthly things for "idle thought and enjoyment of our own leisure lessen the fervour of heart and quench the light of divine love." She insisted that this inner life of prayer was to

be nourished on the Gospel; she always welcomed sermons for herself and her Sisters “because so great was her desire to hear of the most sweet Lord Jesus Christ.”

This deep spiritual life of San Damiano was complete in itself, yet it was never cut off from the outside world, and perforce Clare had to take account of exterior events, and events were preparing that were to spread her fame still farther afield.

The mention of Elias in one of the letters to Agnes shows Clare's confidence in him which was indeed one of Elias' glories. At that period she must have considered him as a faithful follower of Francis, and a sound judge on how to deal with the difficulties of the moment. Other people shared this favourable opinion: Bernard of Besse said that ‘he excelled in human wisdom to such a degree that it was difficult to find his equal in Italy’; and even Angelo Clareno admitted that “there shone in him a rare prudence.” In 1237 Grosseteste of Lincoln was still his warm admirer which says a good deal, for Elias was a layman and supported the lay tradition of the Fraternity. In 1233 he had been re-elected Minister General of the Order, and obviously Clare was satisfied. Indeed he may well have seemed the only person who could handle the divergent currents in the Fraternity. There was the current of the learned Brothers, most of them priests, that of the active missionaries, who were a host in themselves, that of the contemplatives, and in the spirit of Francis there was room for them all; the trouble was that the balance that he had held so delicately was often lost sight of.

Elias was carrying the load of a tremendous activity, still busy with the building of the church, facing the most intricate situations in the many different aspects of the Fraternity's life, and deeply involved in politics. Perhaps the

best description of him is “that he realized the expectations of his friends, and the evil forebodings of his enemies.”

There was a growing disaffection against his rule, especially in the English province and among those Brothers who clung to the hermit contemplative side of the Franciscan vocation; while another storm was approaching with Frederick II as its centre.

Elias had always been a warm admirer of Frederick; perhaps there was in each a spark of the same genius. When Provincial Minister in Syria years before, he had become keenly interested in the healing of the schism of the Eastern Church, as in the fate of the Holy Places; and he was a warm supporter of the Franciscan missions in the near East. All his natural gifts pointed to him as a perfect go-between for the Pope and the Emperor; to his own immense misfortune, in 1238, he was appointed Papal Legate to the imperial court.

Frederick was now back in Italy after a visit to his German possessions; he was at the height of his power, and the old quarrel with the Pope flared up. The very difficulty of his task attracted Elias who grasped very clearly how important for both sides it was that some sort of understanding should be reached.

Elias' very powerful enemies in the Order and the Curia rightly or wrongly profited by the general confusion of the situation to denounce him as unworthy of the trust of Minister General. At first Gregory supported him, but the disaffection of the Brothers became more vocal and at the General Chapter of 1239 the Pope declared that he had nominated Elias originally owing to his friendship with Saint Francis, but since the majority of the Order was against him, he would relieve him of his charge; his place was taken by Albert of Pisa, provincial of the English province.

Elias returned to Assisi and his church building, but in a short time he had again to revert to public affairs. The war between the Pope and Emperor was intensified. Frederick denounced Gregory to all the princes of Christendom as a false pope, no shepherd but a robber, even while proclaiming his faith in the mystical supremacy of the Apostolic See. He protested that the Church was his mother, and that his only desire was to bring her back to the Gospel, to protect her from herself, so that free from all earthly cares she might become a pure school for saints. Gregory replied with a vehement encyclical, and almost while the bells were ringing in the newly finished bell-tower of the Assisi basilica, Frederick appealed to Elias again to act as mediator between him and the Pope. Elias was not the man to refuse, especially as he still enjoyed the Pope's confidence; an unequalled opportunity for peacemaking seemed to be opening before him, perhaps the prospect obscured to him his own ambition.

Elias set out for the imperial court, apparently not considering that by so doing he fell under the excommunication which Gregory had launched against anyone having dealings with the Emperor. He still hoped to make peace; apparently he wrote the Pope a long letter explaining his own position, and putting forward new proposals. This letter was entrusted to Albert of Pisa who died on the way, and the letter was never delivered. The Pope waited for it in vain, and at last Brother Elias was excommunicated by name. When Giles heard of it he threw himself on the ground exclaiming, "I want to get as low as possible since so great a man has fallen into such an abyss." Clare must have felt the same.

It was a terrible position for Gregory, who by this time was 98; with war ravaging his dominions he must have turned more and more in spirit to Clare and San Damiano.

Outwardly at least his fortitude never left him: the friars were sent out through Syria to acquaint Christians with the excommunication of the Emperor and his followers, who retorted by expelling them from his territory. When the Emperor marched on Rome, Gregory, undaunted, exposed the great relics, harangued the people, proclaimed a Crusade against his enemy, declared the throne vacant and Frederick deposed. Rome was saved, but once again all the papal dominions in Italy were exposed to the horror of marauding bands of imperial troops who were mostly recruited among the Emperors Saracen subjects in Sicily. The valley of Spoleto came in for its full share, and though Elias had obtained from the Emperor a letter of protection for the Poor Ladies of Valle Gloria at Spello, he had not done anything of the kind for San Damiano. It is best to turn to Celano to hear what happened.

During that tempest by which the Church was buffeted at different times and in different places during the days of the Emperor Frederick, the valley of Spoleto was forced frequently to drink the chalice of affliction. Bands of soldiers and of Saracen archers like swarms of bees were stationed there by his command so that they might lay waste the fields and harass the cities and villages. At one time they had it in mind to vent their fury on Assisi, a city beloved of God, and the army was already approaching the gates when the Saracens – a most evil breed of men athirst for Christian blood who shamelessly perpetrate every kind of wrong – would willingly have violated Saint Damian's. They therefore rushed to that cloister of Christ's holy virgins whose hearts melted like wax at the sight of them, so that they ran to their mother. Blessed Clare was not afraid, and though at that time she was grievously ill, she bade her daughters conduct her to the door of the monastery there to confront those men of Belial. Before her was carried in a silver box encased in ivory the Body of the Holy of Holies, and

prostrating herself before Him she prayed: "Doth it please Thee, O my God, to deliver these defenceless children whom I have nourished with Thy love into the hands of these beasts? Protect them, good Lord, I beseech Thee, whom at this hour I am powerless to protect." And a voice, like that of a little child was heard saying: "I will always have them in My keeping." Then the Lady Clare continued: "May it please Thee, dear Lord, to deliver likewise the city which nourishes us for love of Thee." And the same voice answered: "The people of Assisi shall be assailed, but through My grace their enemies shall not prevail against them." Then Clare turned to her weeping daughters saying: "Fear not, little daughters; have confidence in Jesus"; and at the same moment the courage of the Saracen dogs turned to terror, and they scrambled speedily down the walls they had already scaled, routed by the might of a valiant woman's prayer.

Clare ordered Sister Illuminata and Sister Francesca who had been supporting her, and those standing round never to speak of the voice they had heard during her lifetime.

If, as seems probable, this happened in 1240 when Gregory was still alive, how proud he must have been of his friend, she, who had always been so full of faith and courage. He died in August, 1241, just a hundred years old, and with him went another of Francis' close friends.

The threat to Assisi was renewed; again we turn to Celano.

Vitale d'Aversa, a fierce, pugnacious fighter, a man greedy for fame, was captain of the imperial forces, and again he turned his soldiers against Assisi. Having cut down all the trees of the valley and laid waste the countryside he encamped his troops round the walls, swearing that he would continue the siege until the city surrendered. Things had come to such a pass that not only the danger was

obvious to all, but the surrender seemed imminent. When the handmaid of Christ heard this, she was grieved, and calling together her sisters, she spoke to them thus: "Dearest daughters, every day we receive many gifts from this city, therefore we shall be guilty of great cruelty and ingratitude if, in the time of need, we do not do our utmost to help it." Thereupon she asked for ashes, and unveiling first of all her own head, she covered it with them, after which she did likewise to all the sisters saying: "Go to our Lord, and with all the love of your hearts beg of Him the liberation of the city." There is no need for me to try and tell how those virgins wept, or how urgent and powerful were their prayers. The following morning God in His mercy caused such trouble in the army that Vitale d'Aversa, that proud man, seeing that he could not succeed in his plan, turned away and no longer molested that part of the country. Shortly afterwards he died miserably.

During the interrogation of the witnesses in the cause of canonization the nuns stress the fact that the Saracens had surmounted the wall, and were already in the cloister of the monastery. This still further explains their panic and adds lustre to Clare's calm courage and confidence.

Since that day the people of Assisi have always kept June 22 as a festa, the Festa del Voto, when they celebrate the liberation of their city through the prayers of Saint Clare and her Sisters, and pay their homage at her tomb in Santa Chiara, and to the memory of that day in San Damiano.

After this tremendous achievement Clare and her Sisters can only have turned again to their penances, their unceasing prayer and charity with increased faith and thanksgiving, knowing that the glory was not theirs.

The Later Years

Clare was nearing fifty, and her health had greatly deteriorated; as one by one Francis' friends passed away – Jacopa de' Settesoli had died in 1239 and been buried in Elias' basilica – everything connected with him became a precious relic for the future.

It was of capital importance to collect and preserve all the sayings of Francis, and Brother Leo confided to Clare's keeping the rolls of parchment in which he and other of the early companions had recorded many of Francis' words. Besides these there were the "many written words" of which Clare spoke in her testament; everything connected with their joint ideal was a sacred trust.

As far as increasing infirmity allowed, Clare led the community life, she healed the sick, cared for all, she did needle-work, and almost certainly she wrote many other letters, now lost. She had to keep in touch with the exterior developments of the whole Fraternity with which the Second Order was so bound up. Certainly for some time she must have been preoccupied with the Rule of the Poor Ladies. Gregory had used the argument of her obedience to his own Rule of 1218 to urge it upon Agnes, but there were clauses in it which could never satisfy Clare. Agnes was doing her best to get it changed for the Prague house, and Gregory himself had tinkered at it through dispensations though he insisted on its nominal observance, partly perhaps for sentimental reasons, partly because of the difficulty of satisfying the demands of the many houses of Poor Ladies. After all he could say that Francis had accepted his Rule, and Clare observed it; and perhaps she felt that Gregory was too old, too harassed by Frederick and his many enormous difficulties, to be expected to make substantial concessions to Agnes or anyone else. Only a short time before his death he had had to cope with and denounce the wandering women calling themselves Minoresses who posed as

belonging to the Second Order: worries of all kinds pressed him hard on every side.

The new Pope only lived sixteen days, and no further conclave was held until 1243 when Innocent IV was elected. He had a notable disciple of Saint Francis, Brother Niccolò di Carbio, as his chaplain and confessor, with five other Franciscans in his household, and he was a staunch protector of the Poor Ladies among whom was his own niece.

During the early years of his reign, however, he had no personal contact with Clare, for the dire feud with the Emperor drove the papal court to Lyons. Innocent needed a very strong fighting spirit to face the situation, since Frederick was by no means the only trouble. The death of Genghis Khan had not perturbed his successors in their tremendous onslaught on the Western World. The Tartars were magnificent soldiers, and utterly regardless of life they ravaged everything they met, and their empire sprawled over the far and near East, even threatening Vienna. If ever there was a time when Europe needed unity it was at that moment, and it must have been extremely irritating and afflicting to Innocent that a good part of the energy which was essential for repulsing the Tartars was being frittered away in trying to control Frederick's mercurial ambition, and in dealing with European quarrels.

The gulf between the Pope and Emperor steadily widened and deepened; in vain King Louis of France tried to act as peacemaker, realizing what an enormous advantage it would be to both sides. Perhaps Innocent feared Frederick too much and distrusted him too completely; perhaps he had no choice; anyhow two years later he summoned a General Council which deposed the Emperor though no ruler in Christendom would accept the Pope's offer and step into Frederick's shoes. Louis IX refused the imperial dominions in

Italy on behalf of his brother, and again he attempted to mediate when the Pope proclaimed a Crusade against the Emperor, an enterprise which incidentally could only prejudice the Crusade that Louis was preparing against the infidels who held the Holy Places.

At such a juncture Elias' imperial partisanship was undoubtedly an extra thorn in Innocent's side. He summoned him to Lyons to justify his conduct; but even a messenger sent by Giovanni da Parma, the Minister General, who was only too anxious to bring the friend of Francis and Clare back into the communion of the Church and Order, failed to move Elias. He remained in Cortona, and Innocent renewed the excommunication.

During all these tremendous and harassing vicissitudes the Pope was pursued by the difficulties in the Franciscan family, since there was no reason to save him what affection had perhaps withheld from Gregory. His letters show clearly that the friars were only too anxious to be relieved of the material care of the Poor Ladies, who on their side were determined to preserve all the ties connecting the First and Second Orders. It was not a simple matter for the friars, for convents of Poor Ladies were arising all over Europe in all sorts of conditions, and repeatedly the Pope had to urge the faithful to support these houses with generosity for which he offered indulgences. However, in 1245 he decided in favour of the Poor Ladies, and this ruling applied to Italy, France, and Germany. On this point, at least, their minds were at rest, but all these controversies and uncertainties involving the fundamental question of poverty must have been intensely painful to Clare, and the early days of her vocation must have seemed very far away.

The Poor Ladies also complained to the Pope that Ugolino's "Rule" bound them too strictly to the Benedictine

observance, but even this feeling was not shared by those houses that had sprung from a Benedictine origin. Anyhow Innocent confirmed Ugolino's Rule for the Poor Ladies in November, 1245, and he stated explicitly that he did so at their own request.

Perhaps the request was not unanimous, for barely two years later, again at their special request, Innocent confirmed a new Rule for them, this time of his own making, and then in 1250 we find him writing to Cardinal Rainaldo, bishop of Ostia, that though he had given the Sisters of the Order of Saint Damian a new Rule of life, he did not wish it to be forced on any community unwilling to profess it.

Innocent's Rule was more or less founded on that of the friars, and it is symptomatic that he uses the word "Sister" and not "Lady." He recommends the Sisters to follow the "use" of the friars in their recitation of the Divine Office, a use which had been compiled by Gregory not long before his death with the help of Haymo of Faversham. But especially Innocent formally committed the Sisters in all things to the care and government of his beloved sons the Minister General and the provincial ministers of the Friars Minor; he stipulated that no new convent was to be founded without the authorization of the General Chapter of the friars; the Sisters were permitted though not forced to hold property in common.

This Rule was distasteful to the friars, who did not want, in a moment of great expansion in their own activities, to have to shoulder the burden of the Sisters; but it was also distasteful to a number of the Sisters. Some houses of Poor Ladies still clung to their old Benedictine tradition and did not favour its effacement; among the Sisters, too, as among the friars there was a sharp division of opinion on the rigid or mitigated observance of poverty; neither did they fancy the

Pope's hint that this new Rule would abolish dispensations and ensure uniformity. It did not please any of the extremists, and Clare, for all attachment to poverty, yet at different times had shown herself ready to accept presents, and to allow the same to her Sisters. Francis, too, had accepted extensive presents; one has only to think of La Verna! The general opinion among Franciscan scholars is that Clare did not accept this Rule; the property clause and the general mitigation of the idea of penance would have seemed to her a betrayal of her whole life.

Circumstances combined to urge Clare to compile a Rule which should express and give form to her and Francis ideal of the life of the Poor Ladies, and probably she actually wrote her Rule about this time; she and her Sisters had lived it for years, and every page is eloquent of personal experience, even though in many places she quotes from the Rules both of Ugolino and Innocent and repeats important clauses from the original Rule given by Francis. It is entitled *Forma Vitae Ordinis Sororum Pauperum* and throughout it shines with Clare's inspiration and with her admirable common sense. She describes herself in the opening words, "Clare, the unprofitable servant of Christ, and the little plant of the most blessed father Francis": like him she wanted to be "humble and subject to all," and it was truly said that "the Lady Clare was as intent upon caring for her Sisters and observing the Rule as any man could be in guarding his treasure." Her solicitude for the suffering was born of her own long experience of illness, just as long experience of community life had taught her that temper and perturbation can never lead to peace between Sisters; the remedy for disagreement is not worry and self-assertion, but prayer. She asks for a friar as chaplain and two honest lay Brothers of holy life "to help us in our poverty even as we have always had through the courtesy of the said brothers." The word courtesy is again an echo of Francis, and Clare

cared for it as much as he did. Clares own life as well as her ideal for the order is summed up in the last words when she wishes that “ever stable in the Catholic faith, ever submissive and subject at the feet of Holy Church we may always imitate the poverty and humility of our Lord Jesus Christ and His blessed Mother, and may always faithfully carry out the words of the Gospel even as we have promised.”

About this time Clare must have written her Testament. Many Franciscan scholars deny that it is genuine, and yet it has something of the flavour of her other writings. If it is a forgery, it must have been compiled from traditional sayings. It runs:

Among the many graces we have received, and do receive from the Lord the Father of mercies there is one for which we must show Him most special gratitude, which is the grace of our vocation. Inasmuch as it is the most perfect, so much the more does it claim our gratitude. We should always bear in mind the words of Saint Paul, “Know thy vocation.” The Son of God has called us to Himself, and the acts and words of Blessed Francis His true lover have brought us by the narrowest path to this day. Therefore, dear sisters, let us never forget the gifts our Lord has granted us especially this grace of our vocation which He gave us through His servant Blessed Francis.

Soon after his conversion when as yet he had neither companions nor sisters, while he was repairing the church of Saint Damian, through the Holy Spirit he foretold to poor men all that has come to pass. Speaking to them in a high voice in the French tongue he said, “Come brothers and help me, for here there will dwell ladies through whose piety our heavenly Father will be glorified throughout the Church.”

Our blessed father foretold this not only for us, but for all who, by their holy lives, should share our lot. Therefore, my sisters, with what fervour, with what faith and perseverance should we keep the commandments of God, and the rule of our holy father that we may appear before our Judge on the last day having multiplied the talents entrusted to us. We have been chosen by Him to be a mirror of the faith together with those sisters who will be called with our vocation that they too may give an example of virtuous life. For all these mercies we are bound to bless the Lord, to praise and follow Him, asking His divine help in all things.

Not long after the conversion of Blessed Francis, I, with a few companions, promised voluntary obedience, and this was manifested to me through the grace in him. Our blessed father Francis gave thanks to the Lord, and was moved with compassion for me and my sisters, knowing well that although we were weak, yet we had not refused to endure poverty and humiliations, and so he promised us his care and protection together with that of his brothers. Thus by the will of the most high God, and of Blessed Francis we came to dwell in the monastery of Saint Damian where soon the Lord of His mercy and grace multiplied us in order that what had been foretold by His holy one might be fulfilled. For we had sojourned in another place, but only for a short time.

About this time Blessed Francis gave us in writing our rule of life which especially exhorts us to persevere in holy Poverty. He was not content during his lifetime to exhort us by frequent discourses and by his own deeds to love and observe holy poverty, but he also sent us many written words, so that after his death we should follow the path he had marked out for us. And we have faithfully observed our promises following in the steps of the Son of God, and of our

blessed father Francis, who chose for his inheritance to renounce all earthly possessions.

I, Clare, unworthy handmaid of Jesus Christ, and of the poor servants of Saint Damian's, have twice voluntarily bound myself to the observation of holy Poverty so that after my death the sisters may not depart from it. And to make sure that this might not be altered I procured its confirmation by our holy father Pope Innocent III under whose pontificate our order began.

I commend my sisters present and future to the successors of blessed Francis our father and founder, and to all his religious, that by their example and teaching they may help us to serve God in holy poverty, and humbly I pray them to see to it, that we, frail plants as we are, may not swerve from our sacred purpose. If it should happen that my sisters leave this monastery and go elsewhere, I fervently desire that they keep this rule in strict integrity.

I also exhort all my sisters in the name of Jesus Christ to walk always in the path of holy simplicity, humility, and poverty, and in all intercourse to observe the discretion taught us by blessed Francis. Only by means of these virtues, and through the mercy of Him who has chosen us can we spread abroad the odour of a good reputation. Love one another in Jesus Christ, and let this charity show itself outwardly in good works; thus other sisters, incited by your good example, will grow in love of God and their neighbour. I pray for her who has to govern that she may raise herself more by modesty and virtues than by dignity of office, causing her sisters to obey her through love more than through duty. Let her also watch over her spiritual daughters with the tenderness that a good mother has for her children; in manner let her be kindly, humble, and accessible so that they may never fear to open their hearts to her on all

occasions. And the sisters should remember that for love of God they have renounced their own will, and have promised willing and unreserved obedience to their mother, so that she, finding love, humility, and concord among her sisters, may feel the burden of her charge lightened, and her office less troublesome.

Let us take care, O my sisters, that having embraced the Me of strict and holy living we may never depart from it through carelessness or ignorance and in doing so cause harm to our Lord, to Blessed Francis, and holy Church whose eyes are fixed upon our conduct. For it is written: Accursed are those who abandon thy commandment. Humbly kneeling I pray our Lord to grant the grace of final perseverance through the merits of His holy Mother, blessed Francis, and all the saints.

Dearly loved sisters present and future, I leave these things in writing that they may be better remembered by each of you. And I remain your mother and your servant.

In this, in her letters, in her Rule, Clare had said her last word; but she was still the immensely eloquent living example of what she taught.

Clare's Sisters were often desperately anxious, partly on account of her visibly declining strength, and also because they knew how she longed for a definite papal reassurance that the Privilege of Poverty would be maintained.

Encouragement came. from her old friends the Benedictines of San Paolo for it was revealed to one of the nuns that Clare would live until she had been visited by the Pope. At that moment nothing could have seemed more unlikely; then suddenly the news spread that the Emperor Frederick Stupor Mundi had died at Ferentino in Apulia. Even since his final excommunication one disaster after another had overtaken him in Germany as in Italy: nevertheless when news came in

the spring of 1250 of the defeat of the Christian forces in the East, of Louis IX a prisoner of the Sultan with the flower of French chivalry, Frederick wrote to the other Christian rulers calling for a joint effort in aid of the King of France; he sent an embassy to the Sultan demanding his release and went himself to Sicily to prepare an expedition. He got no further, and at the last his son, Manfred, wrote to Conrad his half-brother, "on his deathbed our Father, full of contrition submitted himself as a good Catholic to his mother the sacrosanct Church of Rome." Who knows perhaps he thought of Elizabeth, Agnes, Isabelle, Francis, and Clare?

This was in December, 1250, and although imperial mercenaries still harassed the papal territory in Umbria the news must have raised Guelph hopes and everywhere have stimulated conjecture as to the consequences since no successor could inherit Frederick's personal ascendancy. Surely Clare's thoughts must have turned to Elias.

The way was opened for the Pope's return to Italy, and in the following spring Innocent began his southward journey, and in 1252 took up his residence in Perugia.

In September of that year Cardinal Rainaldo visited San Damiano and gave Clare Holy Communion, and she begged him to sponsor her wish for a full and categorical recognition of the rule of poverty. Rainaldo himself authorized Clare's own Rule for use in San Damiano, and certainly advocated her cause with the Pope. It would have been strange had he not done so, for Clare had the matured will of a lifetime behind her with the power of sanctity, and in all eyes she was the impersonation of the ideal of Francis.

That Christmas there came to her a beautiful echo of the festival Francis had once kept at Greccio. Celano tells how the Sisters being in choir for the recitation of Matins, Clare

was alone in her cell, far too ill to move. "And as she thought on the Child Jesus, she was sad that on this night she could not join with the Sisters in singing His praise, and sighing she said: 'O Lord God, here I am alone with Thee in this place.' As soon as she had so said, suddenly she heard the beautiful music and the singing in the church of Saint Francis. She heard the joyful psalmody of the friars and the sound of the organ; and that church was so far away that truly she could not have heard anything had God not willed that the sweet music of the festival should reach her, or that her hearing should be miraculously increased and strengthened. Surely she who excelled all others had deserved to see what is so excellent, that is the church of Saint Francis, and in it the Crib of the Lord. When her daughters came to her the following morning she said to them, 'Blessed be my Lord Jesus Christ for when you had left me, He would not leave me, and thanks to His grace I heard all the solemn festival that was celebrated in the church this night.'"

Incidentally this mention of the crib seems to indicate that the friars were in the habit of recalling the Greccio Christmas by setting up a crib with the essential figures, manger and Child and ox and ass, "to stir people's hearts to devotion," as Francis had wished. There seems no reason to interpret Celano's words in any other sense.

That spring was to be momentous for Clare, and in April she saw her prayers for Brother Elias answered. After Frederick's death he continued to live in Cortona building his great church there to which he gave the relic of the cross he had brought from Jerusalem. His mind had at last turned from politics; he recognized his own fault to the Church and the Order, and admitted his sin in having supported the Emperor, and begged to be absolved. "Lord have mercy upon me a sinner; forgive my vanity and pride. Miserere mei

Domine.” On Easter Eve the archpriest of Cortona absolved him, on Easter Monday he received Holy Communion and died the following day. Elias’ reconciliation must have been one of Clare’s last great earthly joys.

The Pope arrived in Assisi about that same time, and on May 25 he consecrated the upper church of Elias’ basilica, to the building of which he had substantially contributed. It was on this occasion that he canonized Saint Stanislaus of Poland. He also went to San Damiano to see Clare, and Celano tells: “Blessed Clare’s holy body, worn out by long sickness was attacked by a fresh affliction which betokened that Christ was preparing to call her to Himself into eternal joy. Then the Lord Pope hastened to visit her with his cardinals for he deemed it fitting thus to honour the death of her whose life was universally praised and honoured.

“Having entered the monastery he went at once to where she was lying, and gave her his hand to kiss which she did with much devotion, humbly begging him to suffer her to kiss his foot. Wishing to content her, he mounted a little stool, and having extended his foot she kissed it right reverently on the instep and on the sole. Then, her face shining with seraphic joy, she begged him to absolve her from her sins.

“‘Would to God I had as little need of shriving as thou,’ said the Pope, ‘but for thy greater consolation I absolve thee with all the blessings and indulgences that are in my power to give.’ When the Pope and cardinals were departed, Blessed Clare received Holy Communion from the hands of the Provincial Minister of the Friars Minor, and afterwards, her hands crossed, she looked up and said to the sisters, who were beside her, ‘Praise the Lord with me today, for Christ has given me such a gift that all Heaven and earth could not sufficiently thank Him for I have received Him the All-

Highest, and I have received absolution from His Vicar.'" Sister Francesca told later how when the priest brought Clare Holy Communion she saw the Host vanish from his hands and the divine Child appeared radiating light which shone all round the bed.

The Sisters could not bear to leave Clare alone for a moment; they thought neither of food nor drink, says Celano, and wept bitterly, so great was their distress. As for Agnes who had just returned to San Damiano from Monticelli, she was more dead than alive with grief and nothing would comfort her. "O holy Sister," she cried, "don't leave me without you," to which Clare answered, "My dearest, above all, if God wills that I should go, do not cry, for you will follow me very soon and have great consolations before you die." She also comforted some lay Sisters from Monticelli with "divine words," and ordered her veil to be sent to that monastery.

As the summer drew on and Clare became weaker the devotion and faith of the people increased, and "many times cardinals and prelates and people in twos and threes and fours would come to visit her, for all were convinced that she was a great saint. For seventeen days she was unable to eat, but the Lord comforted her with such fortitude that all who beheld her were strengthened and consoled." Brother Rainaldo was often with her, and when he would have consoled her for all her suffering she answered: "Since I experienced the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through the merits and teaching of our Father Francis no suffering has been hard for me, no exertion or penance or illness painful."

The account of Clare's last days is clearly given by Celano and the Sisters who never left her and were witnesses in the Cause of canonization, especially Filippa, Angeluccia, Benvenuta, Anastasia, and Agnese of Oportulo.

On Friday evening three days before the death of Madonna Chiara of blessed memory the sisters were gathered round their mother weeping sadly; one sister sat close beside her and no one spoke. Then Madonna Chiara began to commend herself to God saying: "Go in peace for thou wilt be escorted since He who created thee provided for thy sanctification, and when He had created thee, He infused into thee His Holy Spirit, and He has ever watched over thee as a mother watches over her little child."

The Sisters could not understand her wonderful familiarity with divine grace, and Sister Anastasia asked her to whom she spoke such words. Whereupon the saint answered: "I am speaking to my blessed soul. . . . Blessed be Thou, O Lord, who hast created me." She spoke also of the Blessed Trinity, but "with such subdety" that the Sisters could not well understand her meaning. "Then the sister who was watching beside her said to another who was there, 'You who have such a good memory, remember all that our Lady is saying.'" Madonna Clare heard this and said to all present, "You will remember what I say as long as He wishes who is causing me to speak."

Sister Benvenuta was so impressed with the words spoken by her mother to her own soul that she sat there meditating "on the great and marvellous sanctity of the Lady Clare, and it seemed to her that the whole court of Heaven was preparing to honour this saint. Especially our glorious Lady the blessed virgin Mary was preparing the garments in which to clothe this new saint. Then she saw with her bodily eyes a great multitude of virgins dressed in white with crowns on their heads coming in by the door of the cell where the said mother Saint Clare was lying. Among these virgins there was one far more beautiful than the others, and she wore a more splendid crown than any. And above the

crown there was a vessel from which shone such splendour that the whole house seemed illuminated.

“The virgins gathered round the bed of the Lady Clare, and she who was the greatest among them covered the bed with a transparent cloth which was so fine that though it covered the Lady Clare, yet she was still clearly visible. Then that greatest among the virgins bent down and her face was quite close to the face of the Lady Clare, above her breast, so that she who saw it could not distinguish one from the other. After this all disappeared.”

Sister Benvenuta, who was the witness, went on to assure the judges of the Cause that she was wide awake at the time. On that same Friday evening Clare repeatedly asked Sister Amata, her niece, “Do you see the King of Glory as I do?”

She blessed all her Sisters and daughters and spoke to them gentle words of comfort; and when she made her confession she could say that she had never knowingly transgressed her baptismal vows or those of her Order.

There was, however, still a shadow on Clare’s mind, for though Cardinal Rainaldo had assured her that her Rule would be fully approved by the Pope, no document had arrived, and Sister Filippa testified that Clare’s only wish was to see the Pope’s letter, to kiss it before she died. At last, on August 9 Innocent issued the Bull, *Solet Annuere*, and a friar brought it to San Damiano next day, “and although she was not far from death the Lady Clare took it reverently into her hands and kissed it.”

She wished the Passion to be read and sent for the Brothers who were priests and the other Brothers among whom was Brother Juniper, that worthy minstrel of the Lord who often

spoke to her of Jesus Christ in words burning with love. When he approached she was filled with new happiness and spiritual joy, and asked him what news he had of Christ, whereupon Brother Juniper opened his mouth and “the burning fire of his heart’s love sent forth flaming sparks of words.”

Brother Angelo the courteous was there, crying himself even when he tried “to comfort the Sisters with gentle words,” Brother Giles, too, and Brother Leo who could only repeatedly kiss the bed on which Clare lay. She asked Sister Agnes to recite her favourite prayer to the Five Wounds, and the whispers that the Sisters could catch were all of the Passion; constantly “she repeated the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The last word that Sister Agnes heard was Pretiosa in conspcctu Domini mors sanctorum ejus.” Thus “the Lady Clare who truly shone in untarnished purity entered the brightness of eternal light.” It was Monday, August ix, the feast of San Rufino, the patron of Assisi.

All Assisi and many people far beyond it had been waiting for the news. Twenty-seven years had passed since Francis’ death, forty-two since Clare and Agnes had entered San Damiano: the old folk of the city could still remember them as children. All the citizens streamed down the path to the monastery to pay homage to her who had saved them, who was beloved by all, revered by all, Assisi’s greatest daughter. “Alas, alas, good lady, friend of God, truly she was a saint.” For once opinion was unanimous!

The Podesti at once set guards round the monastery, for it seemed only too likely that relic hunters would try to rob Assisi of its second great treasure. The next day the Pope came from Perugia accompanied by the cardinals, by the Bishop of Assisi and other bishops, and a multitude of friends. The friars began the Office of the Dead when the

Pope remarked that it would have been more suitable to sing the Office of Virgins; and indeed he would have wished to canonize her on the spot. But Cardinal Rainaldo observed that the Church's ritual should be followed and so the Office of the Dead was continued.

It had been decided to bury Clare in San Giorgio as had been done with Francis, and for the same reason of safety. The Pope with the pontifical court and a vast concourse accompanied the body from San Damiano up to the city; and that funeral procession, too, was one of triumph. But how empty the monastery must have been when all was over!

Clare kept her promise to Agnes who followed her sister and mother on November 16 of that same year and was later beatified, and Saint Juliana of Liege also died in 1253.

About two months later Innocent delegated the archbishop of Spoleto to record Clare's virtues and miracles; and with the archdeacon of Spoleto, the Bishop of Assisi, the Archpriest of Trevi, and Brothers Leo, Angelo, and Marco, and Ser Martino the notary, he went to interview the Sisters at San Damiano and to collect evidence for the Cause of canonization.

Miracles abounded at Clare's tomb. Two children were liberated from evil spirits, a raving lunatic was cured, Valentino of Spello felt his stiff and deformed limbs suddenly acquire strength and flexibility. Jacobello of Spoleto was twelve and had lost his sight: twice he dreamed that a beautiful lady called him, "Jacobello, why don't you come to me in Assisi and be cured?" When he reached Assisi the crowd in the church was so dense that he lay down outside the door. His dream was repeated, and sight returned as he touched Clare's tomb. Buona di Monte Galliano had lost one child carried off by a wolf, and the same disaster happened

to another: with all her strength she invoked the help of Saint Clare, and the baby was found in the forest with a dog licking its wounds. Another girl carried off by a wolf cried to Clare for help, and the wolf set her down and ran off. Clare seemed to help all who turned to her.

Innocent died in 1254, and it fell to his successor Cardinal Rainaldo, then Alexander IV, to preside at the canonization in the cathedral of Anagni on August 12, 1255. His Bull of canonization is in itself a poem – “Her feet stood upon earth while her soul was already in Heaven.” It was a true description of her who had passed through this world as a living witness to the beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven, blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God.”

Very soon after Clare’s death the Poor Ladies opened proceedings to have the monastery transferred to San Giorgio; they were too desolate at San Damiano without Clare, they longed to carry on her – their – life in the place where she lay; they felt their right to be as great as that of Brothers who guarded the tomb of Saint Francis. The continued raids of the Ghibellines in Spoleto – in the year after Clare’s death several hundred people were massacred – would also have inclined the City Fathers to moving the nuns within the walls. Eventually an agreement was reached between the nuns, the chapter of San Rufino and the civil authorities, and the exchange of San Damiano for San Giorgio was ratified by a Bull of Alexander IV in 1259: but even before that date the Sisters seem to have moved, headed by the abbess, Benedetta, Clare’s first successor.

They took with them the crucifix which had spoken to Francis, the ivory and silver pyx with which Clare had faced the Saracens, the grating through which the Sisters had been in the habit of receiving Holy Communion, and had

looked their last on Francis, and a number of other relics. They could not take Francis' and Clare's presence from San Damiano; nor have the centuries taken it, and there it remains, one of the most precious of all relics.

Very soon after Clare's death it had been decided to build a basilica in her honour and to hold her body, into which the older church of San Giorgio could be incorporated. The work was entrusted to Philip of Campello; and like that of Elias basilica it was carried through with amazing speed. In 1260 Clare's body was translated from its temporary resting place and enclosed in a sarcophagus of travertine bound with iron bars, and it was buried in a small chamber in the depths of the masonry below the high altar. The ceremony took place in the presence of a number of prelates, of Friars Minor including Saint Bonaventure, and the civil authorities of Assisi. Five years later Pope Clement IV consecrated the high altar, and in the Bull issued for the occasion he declared that Clare's body lay beneath it.

Already Thomas of Celano's "life" of Saint Clare, which had been commissioned by the Pope at the time of her canonization, was being read; and one cannot read that life without being conscious of how acutely the author felt his own words that Clare "was one of those great souls beyond all human praise." To the few remaining Franciscans of the first generation she was the one who had never faltered; to the younger Brothers and Sisters she was a tremendous inspiration; all felt they had a new friend in heaven.

The church of San Giorgio, rebuilt and enlarged, was rededicated to Saint Clare, and was probably frescoed by artists who worked in San Francesco, while pictures of her were painted based on detailed contemporary descriptions. For a century after her death she was always represented holding a lily or the book of the Rule, sometimes surrounded

by the chief scenes of her life. Then came a change and she began to be depicted with a pyx in her hands or even a vase, and in a picture by Giovanni di Paolo flames are coming from the vase and in the midst of them a Host is discernible. From this the artists passed to the monstrance, and an early example is in the beautiful Flemish tapestry given by the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV to the Sacro Convento. Therefore in the iconography of Clare the first accent is on her purity of soul and body, on her wisdom as a foundress; but after the institution of the feast of Corpus Christi and the consequent increase in public devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, she was set in her rightful place as one of the great worshippers and lovers of our Lord in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Clare's body remained hidden for six hundred years, but after the discovery of Saint Francis' body in 1818, it was only natural that there should have been a general wish to find that of Saint Clare. In 1850 permission was obtained from Cardinal Pecci, then archbishop of Perugia and later Pope Leo XIII, to begin excavating in the basilica beneath the high altar. On September 3 the workmen came upon the chamber containing the sarcophagus which was in the same condition as when it had been buried. Those present noticed a very sweet scent emanating from Clare's body which lay with the head turned to the right, one hand on her breast, the other stretched beside her. Thus after six centuries her daughters saw their Mother.

She was reburied in a sarcophagus of plate glass and modern gilding.

A most precious discovery was made some fifty years ago by the Abbess Matilde Rossi who came upon the original of the Rule of Saint Clare wrapped in a cloak which is thought to have belonged to her, and had somehow survived the

various suppressions and depredations which the monastery had suffered from time to time. It is now preserved in the basilica, and we can see the whole text of the Bull, *Solet Annuere*, of Innocent IV which contains the confirmation of Clare's Rule. The complete Rule is contained in the Pope's letter, and on the reverse of the parchment are the words in a thirteenth-century hand: "Blessed Clare held this, and in her devotion kissed it many, many times."

The present ornate crypt of the Church dates from the nineteenth century, and round Clare lie Ortolana, Agnese, and others of the first Sisters. All over the world the life of the Second Franciscan Order continues; and though the Sisters are unseen, they are not isolated from their fellow men, for their mission is through prayer to carry the whole world into the will, which is the love, of God. This was the heritage left by Clare to her daughters, and in many ways her light radiates outwards from the cloister to those who are living beyond it. What she taught is valid for all.

Francis holding the cross, and Clare holding the monstrance stand before us, two eloquent living beings whose wish is to convince us that the way to God, to peace, to unity, is found only through Christ and through love. What does their insistence on poverty mean for us who have not thrown away everything? It may not be a reproach, but it is a warning. Everything in creation belongs to God; whatever we have individually is lent us. Every form of selfishness leads to stagnation, slows down and prevents the vital sap of charity from flowing, separates us from God, and therefore from each other.

In this life, Francis and Clare had such great and warm human hearts, and such God-enlightened souls that even reading their story makes us feel near them. Now, in their closeness to God, they are still nearer to all who need them,

and they can light the love of Christ in other hearts. There are no barriers left for them, and they can help us to break down those that are the cause of so much of our misery. As Clare said to Agnes, so we can say to her: "Pray that by the help of God we may be enabled to call upon the mercy of Jesus Christ, and with you to enjoy His blessedness in the Beatific Vision."

About This EBook

The text of this ebook was taken from a scan of the book *Saint Clare of Assisi* by Nesta De Robeck. The edition used was published by The Bruce Publishing Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1951.

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